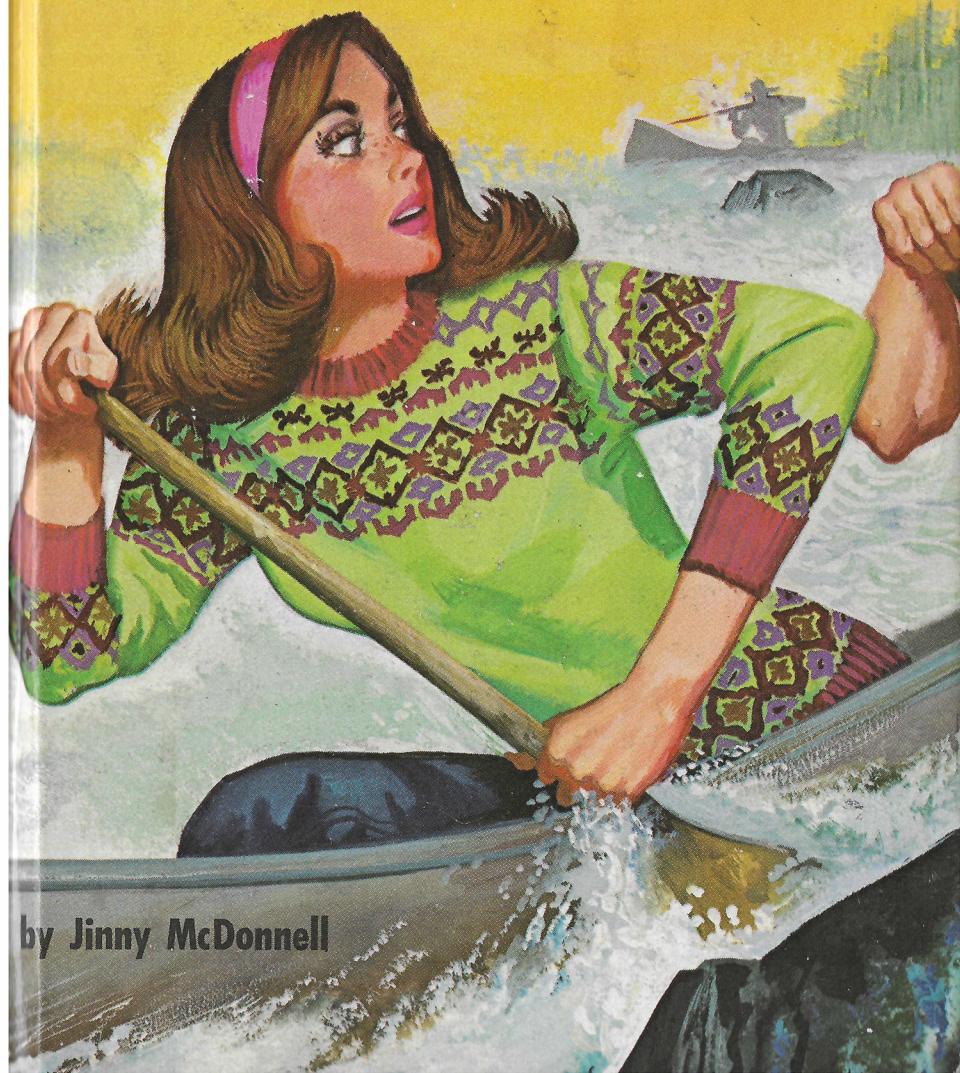




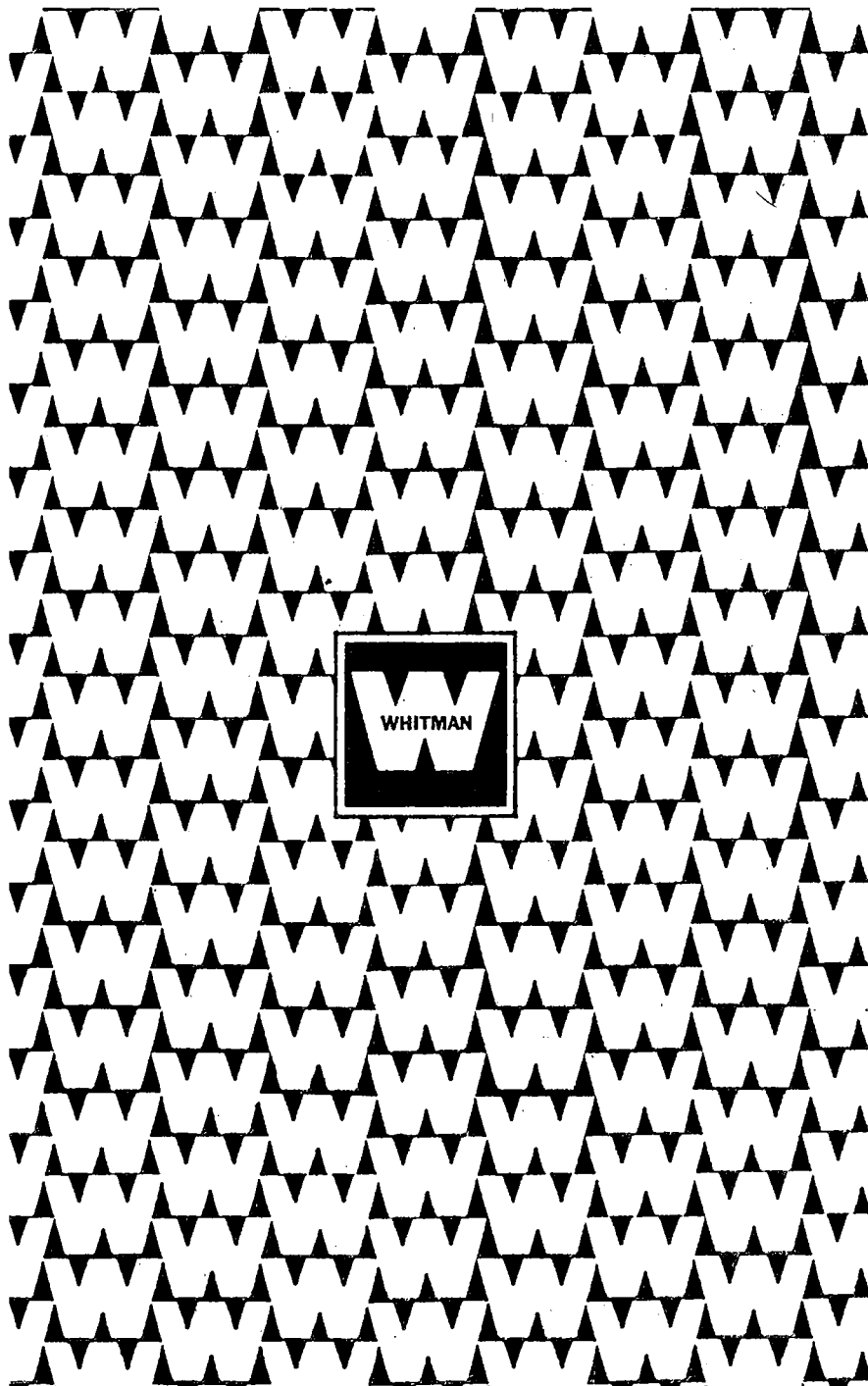
A KIM ALDRICH MYSTERY

THE LONG SHOT



by **Jinny McDonnell**





WHITE WATER!

Kim expected to catch, at any moment, a slug between the shoulders. She didn't look back but just paddled until her muscles screamed for mercy.

"Harder!" said Kevin.

It was impossible to paddle harder, but Kim did the impossible; she was so scared that adrenalin pumped through her body, giving her a burst of energy that she wouldn't have dreamed she could produce.

"Harder!"

She wanted to drop the paddle, collapse, and get it over with. . . .

At last they reached the outlet from the lake into the river—the river, where only the rapids lay between them and help and safety. Suddenly, around a bend, the calm waters disappeared. They were in the rapids!

kim aldrich

the
long shot

by
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the
long
shot

1 over your grave

The heavy glass door leading into Mr. Rydell's outer office, high in the WALCO Building, opened to admit the first visitors of the day. Kim Aldrich looked up from her desk with a smile, ready to say a pleasant "Good morning. May I help you?"

Instead, she did a double take and leaped to her feet, still automatically obeying one of the cardinal rules at Camp Algonquin, where she had spent several adolescent summers: to stand up whenever Mrs. Dixon, the director, entered.

"Good heavens, what in the world are *you* doing here?" The tall, sixtyish woman with salt-and-pepper hair sounded equally astonished to see Kim.

Kim resisted the impulse to ask the same question of the figure who stood before her, to discover what circumstances brought her here, to World At Large Insurance Company, Limited. Instead, she said, "I work here. I'm Mr. Rydell's secretary."

"Incredible. A pilot, a jockey, an archaeologist, a war correspondent perhaps—but you, a secretary?" Mrs. Dixon shook her head in wonder. "There's still hope for the young, after all. I must

say I am happy to take some of the credit for turning a little hoyden into a young lady. Now, will you please tell Mr. Rydell that Mr. Van Alstyne and I are here?"

Dismissed, thought Kim as she announced them on the intercom, smothering a grin as her mind reproduced, in color, one of the flag-lowering ceremonies at the camp: little girls in green shirts and shorts, standing at attention while the bugler struggled to signal retreat. Thanks to a few drops of water placed in the bugle—by a former hoyden named Kim—the music came out with a highly original gurgle.

At the final note, good or bad, Mrs. Dixon's clipped voice announced, "Camp dismissed."

Kim switched off her mental picture and pushed the button on the intercom to announce the visitors. She showed them into her boss's inner sanctum, closed the door behind them, and went back to her desk, consumed by curiosity.

For one thing, Mrs. Dixon was as tense as a rubber band about to snap. Kim had not seen her in years, and it was natural that she show signs of age, but the tension in her face was more than that.

Maybe Mr. Van Alstyne was threatening to sue her, Kim mused. If Mrs. Dixon had totaled his car in a collision, they might be here to discuss a possible settlement.

Or perhaps Mr. Van Alstyne had proposed mar-

riage and they were here to take out life insurance policies for each other's benefit. Kim started to grin as she built a story for them.

Come to think of it, in all the years she had known Mrs. Dixon, there had been no mention of a Mr. Dixon. He could have died earlier or flown the coop, or maybe there never had been a Mr. Dixon, and she was a maiden lady who didn't want the fact known.

Then along came Mr. Van Alstyne, Kim improvised. He was nice-looking and taller than Mrs. Dixon—plus factors. And he let her do the talking—another plus.

He was younger than she, by quite a few years, Kim added gleefully. His hair was just beginning to show a little distinguished gray at the temples.

Question: How did she get him to the point of proposing marriage?

Answer: By offering to take out a huge policy and name him as beneficiary. Her age would then be an advantage to him.

Conclusion: Mrs. Dixon was tense and nervous because she was afraid he might get away.

Kim had to laugh at herself. The story was pure corn. Surely she could do better than that. Besides, Mr. Van Alstyne didn't fit the role at all. He was dressed in conservative oxford gray, white shirt, dignified necktie, hat. He looked like a very successful businessman or industrialist.

"Bingo!" said Kim aloud. "And for a prize, you

asked, thinking this must be a joke.

Mrs. Dixon explained. Mr. Van Alstyne was, indeed, the head of a family-owned shipping firm. "He has a twelve-year-old daughter, Robin. She is a . . . er . . . rather hyperactive child."

Kim translated mentally: *Hyperactive my foot; she's a little stinker.*

"I want Robin to have a normal, carefree summer," Mr. Van Alstyne said. "I think the camp experience would be good for her. Give her a chance to play tennis, swim, ride horseback, get to know other youngsters her age. I wouldn't want her to have any special favors or attentions because of my . . . er . . ."

Because of her family's wealth, Kim thought, nodding so he would continue.

"With one exception," Mr. Van Alstyne said, leaving his previous sentence uncompleted. "I feel she needs protection. I think a private detective is indicated, around the clock. He wouldn't have to be intrusive but just be there, in the background."

"And I feel strongly that a girl like Robin would rebel if she had a personal nursemaid in attendance," said Mrs. Dixon. "Don't you agree?"

Kim most certainly did agree. As the youngest of the three Aldrich children, she had often chafed at being watched over by her brother, sister, and father and by Gerta, the housekeeper who had run the Aldrich home since Kim's mother's death. They were family, though, and

she had put up with the baby-sitting because she knew they did it out of love—and, to admit the truth, because she seemed, even now, to have some sort of genius for getting into scrapes. But a private detective on her heels?

"I'd certainly balk, if I were Robin," Kim said flatly.

"Nonetheless," said Mr. Van Alstyne, politely but firmly, "there will be no camp for Robin unless there is adequate protection."

"Just what do you feel she must be protected against?" asked Kim. "What's the danger?" *And deliver me from nervous, hovering parents*, she added silently, with the exception of Dan Aldrich, of course, who didn't smother her. Her dad actually gave her a lot of latitude, all things taken into consideration.

The danger to Robin stemmed from money, Mr. Van Alstyne explained bluntly. As an example, there were always photographers in the offing, merciless in their quest for candid shots and "inside" stories to sell to magazines and newspapers.

"So far," he continued, "we have managed to shield her from publicity. She has never had her picture in the papers. We don't want her to, either, because once her face were known, she'd be fair game for all sorts of undesirables."

He means kidnappers! Kim thought, horrified. She collapsed into a chair and stared from Mr. Van Alstyne to Mrs. Dixon to Mr. Rydell. She

knew, from their expressions, that she had hit the nail on the head.

No wonder some celebrities made such a fuss about photographers coming near to their children, Kim thought. They probably lived in constant fear of encouraging kidnappers.

"My idea is that you, Kim, would fit the bill," said Mrs. Dixon. "You could come to camp, ostensibly as a counselor, but you would, in fact, be keeping a protective eye on Robin."

"Me?" yelped Kim. "Fend off kidnappers?"

"Don't dramatize," said Mrs. Dixon.

Actually, Mr. Van Alstyne added, the threat of kidnapping had occurred only once, years ago. It had been nipped in the bud and therefore should not be blown up out of all proportion. He merely asked—insisted—that someone responsible for Robin keep an eye on her at all times.

"You fit the bill to perfection," said Mrs. Dixon. "You know the camp, and you're versatile in sports. As I said, Robin is a high-spirited girl, but you, as a youngster, instituted so many pranks that you would be able to anticipate any dangerous ideas she might think up."

Kim was not crazy about the idea, but she had a way out. "I've already had my vacation. I took it during the winter." She glanced at her boss for verification.

Mr. Rydell put his elbows on his desk and, fingers touching, smiled blandly. "I think we could

arrange another vacation without too much difficulty. True, you went to Alpenschloss for a ski holiday, but you spent most of your time on company business."

Thanks a bunch, thought Kim, lowering her eyes so she wouldn't give him a disgusted look.

The decision would be up to her, Mr. Rydell added, taking the words right out of her head. She would, naturally, need time to think it over. "Provided this solution is acceptable to you, Mr. Van Alstyne."

Mrs. Dixon considered the matter closed. "I'll take you to lunch, Kim, and fill you in on the details," she announced. "The Plaza at one o'clock. No, no, no, don't bother to show us out. We'll find our way. You stay here and arrange for your replacement, so you'll be free to leave for camp one week from today."

Dismissed, thought Kim again. Actually, she couldn't blame Mrs. Dixon for sounding so bossy. She taught school for ten months of the year—had for ages—and ran a camp for the other two months. She wasn't getting any younger, either, so her habit of running the show was bound to be more pronounced.

"Better hand me the mail, Miss Aldrich," said Mr. Rydell. He looked faintly amused when Kim looked down and realized she was still clutching the envelopes she had used as an excuse to come in. "I didn't want to ask you sooner, for fear

they'd consider you a little absentminded."

"I don't get it," Kim said. "Mrs. Dixon didn't know I work here."

"True," agreed Mr. Rydell. "She and Mr. Van Alstyne just stopped in to ask my advice. I would have suggested you, even if you had never met before."

Mr. Van Alstyne had several large policies with WALCO. *Very* large. "You can understand that we try to extend ourselves for him when he asks me, as a trusted business associate, to solve a personal problem. Now, you don't have to go, of course, but I'd consider it a favor. . . ."

If her boss puts it that way, what's a girl to do? Accept it with good grace and enjoy it, that's what. "I love my work," she said, grinning, "but never let it be said that I looked a gift vacation in the mouth. Especially when my boss twists my arm!"

Having decided, Kim worked like a whirlwind until noon, then blew herself to a taxi for the ride uptown to the Plaza Hotel at Fifty-ninth Street and Fifth Avenue. She might as well live up to her new image, that of a well-organized young lady, and get there on time.

En route, she checked her appearance in the mirror inside the flap of her shoulder bag. Face on straight? Check. Shiny brown hair in order? Nope; flyaway. Apply comb. False eyelashes in place? Check—in place in a little box on her dresser in the Aldrich apartment, given up as a

hazard since the ghastly day when one had dropped into her soup.

False eyelashes had no place at camp, anyway, she thought. Which reminded her: She'd have to do some scurrying around collecting camp gear—shorts, sneakers, swimsuit, sleeping bag, poncho, tennis racket, riding boots. And name tapes! Ye gods, she'd have to sew on all those name tapes.

"Unless I can con Gerta into doing it," she said.

"Gerta will do it," said the cab driver, meeting her eyes in the rearview mirror. "Pretty girl like you can con anyone into anything. What are you planning, a bank robbery?"

Kim laughed with him, suddenly realizing she had spoken aloud. "No bank robbery, no kidnapping." She stopped laughing abruptly. Why in the world had that particular word popped out? She shivered.

"Air conditioner too cold?" asked the cabbie. "No? Funny how you can shiver for no reason at all, even on a bright summer day like today. My mother used to say, 'Someone just walked over your grave.'"

Kim shivered again. She'd had a lot of close calls in her life, but most of the times, she had been catapulted into the adventures. This time she was walking into something under her own power.

"Look before you leap," her father often urged.

I'm looking, she thought. *The only trouble is, I*

can't see the bottom of things, so I don't know where I'll land. It was creepy.

For once, the sight of the Plaza failed to lift her spirits. Usually the impressive building—with its wide, white stairway leading to the canopied door, the brilliant flags of all nations flying, and the doorman resplendent in more brass than an admiral would wear—delighted her. It reminded her of an Olympic village or the United Nations or an embassy.

Today she had to force a smile for the doorman when he opened the cab door and helped her out. Her feet felt heavy as she climbed the stairs and went into the hushed opulence of the lobby.

Then she gave herself a mental kick. For heaven's sake, she wasn't the type to play a Gothic heroine. All she was asked to do was to go to camp and keep an eye on one twelve-year-old girl. Big deal. Anyway, she had loved being a camper herself. There was no reason to assume she wouldn't enjoy being a counselor even more. End of discussion. *Dismissed!*

Kim's smile was back in place as she greeted Mrs. Dixon, who was there waiting. Together they followed the maître d' into the Edwardian Room, with its magnificent chandeliers. The enormous menu, too, was impressive, and Kim decided she might as well enjoy herself to the hilt. It wasn't every day in the week that she lunched at the Plaza Hotel.

"There's just one thing I don't get," she said. "Why, if Robin is really such a—"

"Hyperactive child," said Mrs. Dixon firmly.

Kim got the message: One did not refer to an Algonquin camper as a stinker. "Hyperactive. Okay, but why take her? Obviously, you have to make special arrangements for this one girl."

It was purely a matter of business, Mrs. Dixon explained. If they all worked hard and gave Robin the best summer of her young life, other wealthy girls, perhaps from her school, might be attracted to Algonquin. Good business. Basic. And Kim was a person she could trust to handle things discreetly and sensibly.

And that, Kim realized, was dumping the whole responsibility in her lap. She shivered a third time.

"Someone just walked over your grave," said Mrs. Dixon.

2 preview of trouble

Kim presented herself at the Van Alstyne town house promptly at 10:00 A.M. on the appointed day. The taxi that would take her and Robin to Grand Central Station waited at the curb.

Funny thing about town houses, she thought as she waited for someone to answer the door. So many of them were like this narrow little gray building, sandwiched between taller apartments, blank-faced from the front. Out in back was where one would unexpectedly come upon a little gem of a garden. Everything would be scaled to size, but there would be a place to sunbathe, barbecue, and plant flowers. It would be such fun to have a little plot of secluded ground in the middle of New York.

No point in wishing for the moon, Kim decided. Anyway, she was about to have the Adirondack Mountains at her disposal, so perhaps she already had the moon.

"Miss Aldrich?" asked the gray-clad woman who answered her ring. "Please come in. Robin will be right down."

That was wishful thinking on the part of the

housekeeper. She had to go upstairs and get the child. Robin had elected to be difficult.

Kim was left cooling her heels for ten minutes. She was beginning to think they'd miss the train, when, finally, down the stairs came trouble, in the guise of a blond girl with her hair skinned back into a too-tight ponytail, and her face was like a thundercloud.

"Miss Aldrich, this is Robin," said the housekeeper.

Kim held out her hand. Robin ignored it and stuck out her tongue, just enough to get her message across.

Time was really running short, but Kim didn't see how she could grab the little monster and run for it. Even a little stinker should be kissed good-bye by her parents.

"Miss Aldrich is going to take you to the station in a taxi," said the housekeeper, kissing the stiff-backed girl on the cheek. "Have a lovely summer." There was genuine affection in her tone, but to Kim it was incredible that the woman was the only member of the farewell committee.

"I don't want to go in a taxi," announced Robin. "Why can't John drive me?"

John must be the chauffeur, thought Kim, trying to come up with an answer to Robin's question. She was not about to tell the girl that the reason for the taxi was to avoid calling attention to Robin. One little girl, dressed in green camp

shirt and shorts, would look like any other Algonquin camper and could melt into the group. A chauffeur would change the picture.

"It's John's day off," said the housekeeper gently.

"Well, I don't want to go in a taxi. I don't want to go *period*."

At that point, Kim wasn't so sure she wanted to go, either, but a promise was a promise. Besides, she had never turned her back on a challenge, and she didn't intend to start now. In her heart, she felt sorry for the thorny little kid, but the problem was whether or not she could ever get through to her.

"Come on, Robin," she urged, smiling. "Camp is a lot of fun. You'll love it."

"Huh! That's what they always say. 'Robin, you'll just *love* boarding school. Robin, you'll just *love* camp.'" She glared at Kim. "Do you think I'm stupid? Nobody cares whether I like it or not. They just ship me off, like parcel post, to get me out of their hair."

"That's not so at all," said the housekeeper in a businesslike tone. "Your mother and father love you very much. They'd never get over it if anything ever happened to you. Now, you be careful and have a marvelous time. I'll write to you. Come along."

She went to a closet and took out a suitcase. "Her trunk has been shipped ahead, with her duf-

fel bag. She has enough in here—pajamas, swimsuit, toothbrush, and so on—so she won't have to unpack anything else today," she told Kim. "Robin, you have your shoulder bag. I put a couple of magazines in it, in case you want to read on the train."

Good thinking! thought Kim. The housekeeper had obviously handled other send-offs and knew enough to leave the suitcase out of sight until the last minute—and to cut short the leave-taking. She picked up the suitcase, ushered Kim and Robin out the door and into the cab, then waved them off quickly.

En route to Grand Central, Kim launched into an animated description of Camp Algonquin. It was a strictly one-sided conversation.

Their train was to leave from the upper level of Grand Central, so they got out of the cab at the Forty-second Street entrance. Kim reached for Robin's hand as they went through the glass doors leading to the pedestrian ramp. Robin shook free.

"I am twelve years old." Her voice was icy.

"Simmer down," said Kim. "It'll be a madhouse in there, because several other camps are leaving this morning. I think the only really practical way to keep from getting separated would be to rope ourselves together like mountain climbers."

"Huh!" sneered Robin. "What do you know about mountain climbing?"

"You'd be surprised how much I know. About

avalanches, too. I'll tell you how I got caught in one, if you'd like, but not now. You just stick to me like glue until we get aboard that train."

They were swept along by a human tide of boys, girls, mothers, occasional fathers, and counselors, all determined to be compressed into a rotunda that, no matter how vast, was designed to accommodate only half their number. Kim felt like a sardine as she stretched her neck, trying to see over the crowd, to locate the sign that would indicate Camp Algonquin's meeting place.

The noise was deafening. Old buddies from previous camp seasons shouted to each other. Girls shrieked greetings. Parents gave last-minute instructions. An occasional youngster wept and begged to be taken back home. Counselors called out orders to gather here for Forest Lake or there for Timlo or somewhere else for Blythedale. The public-address system blared boarding instructions for trains about to pull out.

Kim wished she could conjure up a pair of handcuffs to secure Robin to her wrist. It probably would not have worked, though, because the crowd would continue to surge and tear her arm right out of the socket.

"Here. This is money for my daughter's camp bank account," someone shouted in Kim's ear. Some bills were thrust into her hand.

"Hey, wait!" Kim shouted back. "Who's your daughter?"

"You *are* from Camp Blythedale, aren't you?" asked the harried woman. "Then you should know—"

"I'm not from Blythedale." Kim thrust the money back.

"But you *have* to be from Blythedale," groaned the woman. "You're wearing green slacks and a green shirt. That's the Blythedale uniform."

"Did you say Blythedale?" said another near-frantic mother. "Good. Here's Annie's medicine. It's for her allergies, you know. And don't forget to tell the camp nurse that Annie is violently allergic to aspirin. She must *never* have aspirin." A package was pushed into Kim's hand.

"I am not from Blythedale," said Kim firmly. "The Blythedale sign is right over there."

It was Kim's first view of departure day from the counselors' side of the fence. As a camper, she had always loved the hustle and bustle and excitement, never doubting that everyone would get sorted out and aboard the right trains. It always came out all right, too. Now she figured it must be an annual miracle. She would have put in for a double miracle if she had known that her problems would be compounded by a second camp with the same uniforms: green slacks for counselors, green shorts for campers.

A tall, dark-haired young man, leading a snake dance of small boys, worked his way past Kim. "Follow me, men," he ordered, glancing back to

check on his shouting charges.

The camera he wore slung around his neck for safekeeping swung and caught Kim right above her left eye. "Oh, hey, I'm sorry," he apologized, stopping so suddenly that his boys piled up behind him.

"Think nothing of it," she sniffed. "I've had two blue eyes all my life. One black one will be an interesting change."

She dove for Robin, who seemed to be melting away in the crowd, caught her by the ponytail, and reeled her in. Inspired, Kim looked up at the young man. "You're tall enough to see. Can you find the Algonquin sign?"

"Algonquin, hey?" He spoke so quietly that he talked under the noise and Kim could hear him. "It's on the far side of the information booth, right beside our sign, 'Eagle Rock.' We're going your way, all the way to the Adirondacks. Our camp's right near yours. I'm Kevin Clark."

"I'm Kim Aldrich, and this is—" She bit her tongue; she had almost blurted out Robin's name—to someone who might be unduly interested, for all she knew.

"Come on, you Eagles," Kevin ordered, "break trail for the ladies. Kim, follow us."

She didn't. She stopped in her tracks. She had been hit on the head by a camera, and she suddenly remembered that finding Algonquin was the least of her worries; Mrs. Dixon would never leave

without her. Watching out for photographers should be her immediate concern!

And right over there by the ticket windows was a man with a camera and what looked like a telephoto lens. He was aiming in their direction. Kim's heart did a flip-flop.

True, he might be just a newspaper photographer getting local color shots of departure day. The papers usually had one or two such pictures. To make things more interesting and personal, they usually focused on individual faces, with the crowd as background.

Wouldn't it be just the limit if, inadvertently, someone featured Robin Van Alstyne in a character shot? Or worse, if someone already knew who she was and was making ID pictures to pass along to a kidnapper?

Kim grabbed Robin's arm and swung her around so her back was to the camera.

"Hey, what are you doing?" yelped the little girl.

It wasn't Robin.

Kim's mouth went dry. Her heart seemed to stop. Now what was she going to do? Get someone to make an announcement on the PA system? "Will Robin Van Alstyne please report to the Algonquin meeting place?" Hardly. "Has anyone seen a small blond girl with a ponytail, name: Robin Van Alstyne?" Negative.

She must have had rocks in her head to agree

to this job, Kim thought. Mrs. Dixon and Mr. Van Alstyne had more rocks in theirs to let her. And Mr. Rydell had a ton of rocks; he had actually persuaded her, and he, of all people, should have known better. He knew how she could get mixed up with dope smugglers and jewel thieves and whatnot.

Yes, but he also knew she had turned in a good piece of work for WALCO in each case. Mr. Rydell expected her to succeed, no matter how difficult the assignment.

Unfortunately, his expectations did not constitute a guarantee. Kim's heart was in her shoes.

You can't just quit the job, she told herself, much as you wish you could turn in your notice, effective immediately. You're not talking about some typing and dictation; you're talking about a human being. Monster First-Class Robin might be, for deliberately ducking out, but she had to be found, for her own protection, whether she liked it or not.

Unless it was already too late.

Kim wished she could change the seasons. Drat this crowd; she could get through it if it were winter and she were trying to board the Montrealer, the ski train that swung through New England and into Canada. She had once used her ski poles, pointed ends held forward, and yelled, "Gangway!" The crowd had parted instantly.

Okay, no ski poles. Elbows would have to suf-

fice. Kevin was still in sight. Maybe he could help. He wouldn't have to know Robin's name; he already knew what she looked like.

Now, once again, Kim threw good manners to the winds and pushed and shoved her way through. She didn't even make a pretense of saying, "Excuse me," or "I beg your pardon," or "Sorry," or even "Please." She fought like a tiger trying to rescue her cub and, to her own dismay, found she wasn't above administering a well-placed kick in the shins.

She made it to the Eagle Rock sign.

"Lose something?" asked Kevin, grinning down at her. "'Never let a camper get away' is my motto, although you get one, now and then, that fights like a trout on the line. Okay, men, you can let her out now."

The tight circle of boys opened. Robin had somehow been snared and held captive. Kim's knees felt weak with relief. Thank heaven for Kevin Clark.

"Take her," said an Eagle. "Girls, ugh!"

"Boy, I'm sure glad we don't have to take *her* on the train with us," said another.

"I'd jump off, smarty," retorted Robin. "I wouldn't go anywhere with you."

"Don't pull any more cute tricks, young lady, or I'll sic my whole gang on you," said Kevin.

"You wouldn't dare," snapped Robin.

"Don't test me." He folded his arms, scowling

at her, and Robin went meekly with Kim.

Mrs. Dixon, looking slightly frazzled, greeted them at the Algonquin meeting place. She was holding a clipboard, checking off names. "Now, you stay right there," she told Robin. "Don't move. We'll be leaving shortly."

Someone thrust a pair of glasses at Kim. "They're my daughter's," said a young woman. "She always loses them. She'll leave them on the train unless you. . . ."

Who was her daughter? Kim wondered.

"My daughter's health certificate. . . ."

"Her braces. . . ." "Don't forget to make her wear the. . . ." "She has to be tutored in. . . ." "Make her wear her earplugs whenever she goes swimming. . . ."

"Put it in writing," Kim told them all. "Send written instructions to Mrs. Dixon. And don't forget to mention your daughter's *name*."

"I want to go home!" wailed an overweight child of about eight.

Her mother knelt down and wept with her. "Mommy loves you, angel," she said. "I'll write to you every day, and you write to me. I'll be sad all summer, until you come home again."

Kim groaned inwardly. Why, why, why was there always a parent who did this? Ten to one, if the girl stuck it out for two days, the mother would start phoning, insisting on talking to the daughter, making sure she'd never get over her

homesickness. And she'd show up next weekend, long before Parents' Day, to make doubly sure.

The loudspeaker blared, and one group of girls filed toward the big iron gates leading to one of the ramps. One camp was moving out.

"All right, girls, line up and count off," said Mrs. Dixon briskly. "Last check to make sure we're all here, *with* suitcases."

"I won't go without Pooky," a camper announced flatly. She snatched a squirming miniature poodle from her mother's arms. The puppy began to lick her face enthusiastically.

"If she can take her dog to camp, then I want to take my dog to camp," said another sprite. "That's only fair."

Mrs. Dixon rolled her eyes heavenward. "Pooky doesn't want to go to camp," she said, plucking the dog away and handing it back to the mother.

"He does so!" protested the girl.

"Look, honey," said Kim, "he's a very little dog. There are horses at camp, lots of horses. He might be frightened."

Everyone began to talk about horses—even the fat weeper, who announced that she hated horses.

"Count off," Mrs. Dixon ordered again.

Kim didn't care about the total count. She had to keep track of only one girl. She had taken her eyes off Robin for barely one split second, just long enough to help someone part with a puppy.

That split second was too long. Robin was gone again.

Kim had a crazy impulse to blow the counselor's whistle that hung from the lanyard around her neck. Blow once, and the surprise element would cause a minute of silence—long enough for her to yell, "Robin Van Alstyne!"

She almost did yell that name, because she spotted Robin being swept along with a group of girls dressed in similar uniforms. They were heading toward Gate 5.

"Camp Blythedale now boarding," said the announcer on the PA system.

Just what Kim had always needed: a little terror who deliberately went off with the wrong group. Robin wasn't stupid, Kim was sure. She surely knew that Blythedale was not the name of her camp. She had probably filed the information about the uniforms for just this occasion. If she got on the wrong train, she'd be sent back home rather than to Algonquin.

Kim took off at a gallop. She was stopped by a uniformed gatekeeper.

"Your ticket, please," he said.

The only ticket Kim had was for the Algonquin train. Campers were checked through the gate by the directors; counselors carried their own.

"Please!" Kim begged.

From somewhere down the ramp, a conductor called, "'Board!"

Now what do I do? Beg him to stop the train? Have him ask Robin's name and relay it to the world? Kim fretted silently.

"I'm sorry, miss, but you have to have a ticket to go through. Regulations," the man said.

There was a reason, as Kim knew only too well. Parents were not permitted to go through. If they were, the trains would never go out on time.

Someone leaped over the ropes that formed an aisle—campers inside, parents outside. He was past the gatekeeper before the man saw him.

"Hey!" he called futilely after the retreating form. "You can't go in there!"

"Kevin," Kim yelled, "she's gone! Wrong train!"

"What happened? If something is wrong, why didn't you—" the gatekeeper began.

"Never mind what happened," Kim snapped and pushed her way past the gatekeeper. He was lucky she hadn't used her judo training and thrown him flat.

She could hear the wheels of the train shrieking as they began to move. She went flying down the ramp, just in time to see Kevin leap aboard.

The only way she could explain his presence was that he must have witnessed her little drama at the gate or seen Robin. And it didn't matter which, if he could only get Robin in time.

Kim stopped kidding herself. Robin could have been kidnapped exactly that way—and it would have been a cinch.

3 the little stinker

Kevin jumped off the moving train with Robin in his arms. He set her on her feet but kept a firm grip on her arm. Kim took her free hand for the walk back up the ramp and through the gate.

“What did you do that for?” demanded Robin.

“Never let it be said that an Eagle Rock counselor failed to rescue a damsel in distress.” Kevin’s tone was light, but his face was pale under his tan.

“What about my suitcase? You left it on the train,” Robin accused.

Kim laughed from sheer relief. Who cared about a suitcase? Robin’s trunk would have enough things to take care of her needs.

Then a horrid thought struck her. If someone had tried to kidnap the little dickens, the luggage tag on the suitcase would have given her name and destination—exact directions as to where to make the second attempt!

Even if there were no luggage tag—and Kim didn’t remember seeing one—the clothes in that bag would all have name tapes. Somewhere inside the suitcase would be the name of the camp.

"Tell me, Robin," she said, "did you get on the wrong train on purpose, or did someone take you there?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!" retorted Robin spitefully.

There were some kids, Kim mused, who should be dehydrated, so they could be packed into a small box and taken to camp. Once there, they could be soaked in water and reconstituted.

Maybe a cage would be better, addressed to the Bronx Zoo. Robin wasn't going to pull the vanishing act again, however, even though Kevin had to leave them and get back to his own campers in a hurry.

"Now," she said, "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you were swept away in the crowd. We are not going to have a repeat performance. We are going to hold on to each other until we rejoin the Algonquin girls and until we are all on the train. Understood?"

She told Robin to hold her hand, palm up, and grasp her wrist. She, in turn, put her palm down and grasped Robin's wrist.

Robin dug the nail of her first finger into Kim's wrist. Kim arranged her face into a smile and did exactly the same right back, without comment.

"Ow! Why did you do that?" asked Robin.

"Do what?"

"*That*," snapped Robin, digging deeper.

"Ask a silly question. . . ." Two could play that

game, and Kim increased the pressure of her own fingernail enough to prove she meant business, although not nearly enough to draw blood.

Stalemate. Neither one would flinch, but Kim caught a flicker of grudging respect on the girl's face. They rejoined their group, without further discussion.

Mrs. Dixon had somehow managed to create a degree of order out of chaos. More than a hundred girls, ranging in age from six to fourteen, were divided into groups of twelve. Each group was presided over by two counselors, except the one with vacancies for Kim and Robin.

Their train was announced. As if this were the signal they were waiting for, fond mothers surged forward with last-minute instructions.

"My daughter has never been away from home before . . . very shy . . . afraid of the water . . . at an emotional stage. . ."

What could have been a relatively simple procession toward the gate became a mob scene. At the cutoff point, girls who had been to Algonquin before said quick and happy good-byes. Others held back. The fat girl and her mother wept a new flood. Robin planted her feet like a stubborn little mule, but a slight pressure on her wrist got her moving forward.

Camp Algonquin finally made it aboard its special car. Kids scampered up and down the aisle, climbed over the seats, bounced gleefully. It

dawned on Kim that many of them had never ridden on a train before. Planes were old hat, so ordinary that the chief interest was what movie would be shown in flight. A train was new and exciting.

Kim wished they had an in-train movie, because she had no idea how she was going to amuse her reluctant companion for several hours. Once they got to camp, it would be relatively easy. Kim would keep her busy, move her from one activity to the next until—heaven willing—something rang a bell. If she could catch a glimmer of Robin's genuine interest in arts and crafts, riding, dramatics, swimming, *anything*, Kim could build on that.

Meanwhile, she planted Robin in the seat by the window and took the aisle seat. "Would you rather turn the seat backward, so you can talk to the girls behind us?" she asked. "Did you know that the seats could be reversed?"

"What do you think I am, stupid?" said Robin. "Everybody knows the seats can move. Anyway, if I ride backward, I'll throw up. I bet you don't even know how to reverse the seat."

Kim stood up to prove that she could, exactly as Robin had planned. The girl scooted to the door and almost leaped off into a crowd of Eagle Rock boys heading for their special car. For the second time that day, Kim caught her by her flying ponytail.

"If you don't let go, I'll yell for a cop," Robin snapped. "I'll scream bloody murder. I'll say you're kidnapping me. The police will come and arrest you. You'll go to jail, and I'll go home."

The little monster wouldn't hesitate to shout, Kim was sure. And a fine kettle of fish that would be. By the time the fracas could be straightened out, the train would be long gone. Or, if the train were held up long enough, the other Algonquin campers would decide to go home, too. End of the camp. End of the Van Alstyne business for WALCO. End of Kim Aldrich, secretary hoping to be promoted to insurance investigator.

There would also be a new invasion by the mothers. They would wait in the rotunda for the train actually to pull out. A hint of a problem would send them through the barriers and to the train, there to add to the confusion.

"Let go!" Robin's voice rose an octave.

"Kevin," begged Kim, spotting him among his boys, "do something!"

He reacted in a split second. "Hey, Tommy," he yelled, "throw me a pass. I'm going for a touchdown. You Eagles from the blue team are my blockers, so get going. Guys from the gold team try to stop us."

A football came hurtling from the rear ranks. Kevin snaked it from the air, tucked it against his ribs, and, surrounded by boys, charged aboard the train, through the door leading to the Algonquin

car. Robin and Kim were swept back inside.

"Let me out of here!" yelled an Eagle. "What are you doing to us, Kevin? This is a girls' camp. Yuk!"

"Don't panic, men," Kevin said. "Eagle Rock car is just beyond. Go through the passageway."

He saw them on their way, then planted himself in the exit door leading to the platform. "'Board," said the conductor. The escape hatch was closed, and the train began to move out.

"At Eagle Rock we have a system for handling kids who get out of line," he said, looking down at Robin. "Every night, before taps, we make them run. A mile for a small offense. I'd give you five miles. You'd be too tired to get into any mischief after that. You'd crawl in the sack and go to sleep."

"That's stupid," sneered the little spitfire. "You'd have to run, too."

"Keeps me in shape," Kevin said with a grin. "But I don't have to run if I don't want to. I can always borrow the camp station wagon and drive along behind the kids to sort of nudge them on their way."

Robin said she'd lie down in the road. He'd have to stop the car or run over her. If he didn't stop, he'd be arrested. Anyway, he couldn't do that to her, because he wasn't her counselor.

"Amen to that," he agreed.

"And you wouldn't dare, you, you Kim Aldrich,

you." It sounded like a direct challenge.

The idea was tempting. As a matter of fact, Kim could go a step beyond and find certain advantages in corporal punishment.

She remembered a time when she was very young, right after her mother died. Her father was worrying about rearing his tomboy daughter all alone. A friend of his, a country doctor, advised, "Turn her over your knee and tan her hide until it smells like burning leather."

Dan Aldrich had never resorted to that method. His daughter thought she might be tempted to use it if Robin kept on needling—and if it were not against the law.

As a rule, Kim enjoyed challenges. She was genuinely fond of kids, too, and hoped to have a whole gang of her own someday. Robin wasn't like most kids, though. Robin was absolutely poisonous.

And all Kim had to do was make her enjoy camp, give her a carefree, normal summer! Keep her from running away, from demolishing the camp, from making enemies instead of friends—and do it all without giving her any special attention that might set her apart.

"Well, have to get back to my gang," Kevin said, breaking into her train of thought. He gave Kim a smile and Robin a quick wink. "Have fun, Princess."

Robin suddenly flushed and stood transfixed.

The instant Kevin had gone, a high voice from the back of the car began to chant, "Kim has a boyfriend; Kim has a boyfriend." The rest of the campers picked it up.

That brought a hoot of laughter. Then one of the girls, grinning derisively, brought her face close to Robin's. "You think he's interested in a little kid like you? You think he called *you* Princess? That's silly."

Kim felt positively sorry for her charge. Twelve years old was definitely not too young to have a crush on an older man. It could be painful.

"Everyone's silly at that age," piped up a grinning little sprite with red pigtails and freckles. "I'm silly, too, but I don't let it bother me. I'll outgrow it."

Just when Kim had been thinking how cruel kids could be, especially to those who invite cruelty, along came one who was so rational that it was stunning. It was like a breath of fresh air.

Camp was supposed to be fun. Robin was supposed to have fun. Somehow she was going to teach Robin to see the humor in life, to laugh at herself.

Even if it killed her.

4

your name is poison ivy!

The train ride reminded Kim of the shakedown cruise of a ship. It was a time of getting acquainted, singing camp songs, relating adventures of past summers.

They sped along the east bank of the Hudson River, crossed over a high trestle bridge from Troy to Albany, then rolled northward, past Saratoga. At last they entered the foothills of the Adirondacks, lands made famous by James Fenimore Cooper and his *Leatherstocking Tales*.

For Kim, it was a journey back into the past. She had loved camp and had enjoyed leaving the city and going into the lush green of the mountains. She felt like a pioneer, ready to cope with anything, even Robin.

For many of the campers, it was a journey into the unknown, exciting at first but boring once the novelty wore off. Some of the younger girls went to sleep. Older girls began the refrain "When are we ever going to get there?"

The train rounded a turn, and there, spread out before them, was Lake George, a stunning spectacle of deep blue water surrounded by mountains.

The campers came to life and scrambled for the doors as soon as they opened. They were herded into waiting buses and on their way.

A half hour later, they drove through a gateway of peeled logs with an overhead sign, CAMP ALGONQUIN, bearing a picture of an Indian maiden. It was just as Kim remembered it. The main building, housing the dining hall and visitors' rooms, was at the left. To the right of it were Mrs. Dixon's quarters and the office, then the infirmary. Directly ahead were the tennis courts, archery range, and athletic fields. Last came the cabins, made of logs, for the campers.

Still checking counterclockwise, she saw the fields where the horses grazed, a riding ring, and the barns. Just as it should be, Kim thought, with campers who had arrived earlier by car streaking across the compound to greet them.

A magnificent bay horse, head held proudly, pricked up his ears and, with a loud whinny, sailed over the fence to join the reception committee. He raced to Kim with such delight that he almost knocked her over, then nuzzled her face and neck and tried to push his nose into her pocket.

"Mike!" Kim was equally delighted. She had brought a lump of sugar, just in case he was still there . . . in case he still remembered her.

Mike was a colt when she had last seen him. They had taken a shine to each other, and Mike

used to refuse to bed down at night unless she came to say good night to him. If she was late, he'd jump the fence and paw at the steps of her cabin until she came out and gave him a carrot or an apple.

He had finally decided that it was his right to be her constant companion and that he preferred her cabin to his stall. It was a game trying to keep him out. He accompanied her swimming and nudged her back to shore whenever he felt she was too far out. He made himself a nuisance on the tennis court. He even tried to get into the bus when Kim left camp.

Kim threw her arms around Mike's neck.

Someone promptly tried to pull her away. "That's my horse," announced Robin flatly. "His name is Shooting Star."

"He is not your horse," retorted a dark-haired girl. "His name is not Shooting Star; his name is Mike. And your name is . . . is . . . Poison Ivy!"

Oh, dear, Kim thought, groaning inwardly. Usually a nickname, even an odd one, is a sign of friendship and acceptance. One like this is the kiss of death, and, the way Robin is acting, it could stick.

She took the horse by the halter. "Stand back, you kidlets, so he won't step on you by accident," she said, leading him to the fence. She gave him his lump of sugar, rubbed his nose again, and then slapped him on the rump to send him back

over the fence and into the field.

"Okay, kids," she said, "the first order of business is to find your cabins, choose your bunks, and then find your swimsuits. You, too, Robin."

"I'll sleep in the stable, with my horse," announced Robin.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Dixon. "You'll go to Cabin Six, on the double. Dismissed."

Robin muttered something about concentration camp, but she went. Back rigid, dragging her toes along the dirt path, she trailed Kim to the cluster of cabins.

Glancing back to make sure she was still there, Kim felt something close to physical pain. Nobody except the housekeeper had said good-bye to Robin when she left home. Then Robin had fantasized a romance with Kevin. Next she had tried to claim a horse for her own.

That poor child had nobody to love, not even a pet. She was pitiful. And, on the train, she had fouled up her chances to make friends. She absolutely refused to let anyone get close to her.

It seemed to Kim that she was crying for help and, at the same time, rejecting every overture—or else she was just plain nasty all the way through, and Kim wouldn't let herself believe that the girl was really such a very rotten apple in the barrel.

Robin was enough to try the patience of a saint. Kim was no saint. She was just a plain mortal,

but she was stubborn enough to keep on trying, to hang in there, she decided. On to Cabin Six!

"Hi! I'm Jan, the other counselor assigned to this cabin." A pretty dark-haired girl greeted the group as they stepped inside what would be their home for the summer. "And you're Kim, right? Okay, girls. Come on in, and let's get settled."

There were six double-deck bunks on each side of the cabin. A single cot at either end was reserved for counselors. Bathing facilities were in a wing. Footlockers and duffel bags were stacked at the center of the room, beside a long writing table with benches.

"I get the upper bunk," yelled what seemed like the entire contingent, in unison.

"Fair is fair," Jan announced. "We'll work by the buddy system. Those of you who already have best friends, stand over on that side of the cabin. The rest of you count off and line up by twos. Each pair will take over one double-decker. You can decide between you who gets the top bunk for the first half of the season; you switch for the second half."

Everyone was satisfied except the weepy fat girl, who planted herself on one of the cots and said she wanted to be left alone. Robin, with no buddy, climbed to an upper bunk and defied anyone to make her give it up.

"Okay, Robin," Kim agreed, to avoid an unnecessary confrontation, "you take that upper, and

I'll take the lower. And you—what's your name? Angela?"

"Angular," snorted Robin. "That's what she wishes her name was, only she'll never make it, the fat pig."

"Pipe down, Poison Ivy," snorted someone else.

"Angela," said Kim firmly, "you can have my cot for the time being. Once you make friends, you'll probably want to switch, but it's okay for now."

There was much hustle and bustle as footlockers were dragged around and stowed under bunks. Toothbrushes, soap dishes, washcloths, towels, and pajamas were stashed in the cupboards at the head of each bunk. Beds were made up, with results less than adequate to stand inspection, but skills would improve with time.

"We'll make your beds, Kim and Jan," offered two imps, Muffin with the red pigtails and freckles and Casey with black hair and Irish blue eyes.

Kim smothered a grin, shot Jan a look, and thanked them profusely. Both counselors busied themselves helping the new girls, so they wouldn't notice the job being done for them. Camp had begun, and it always began with short-sheeting the counselors.

The bottom sheet would be tucked in tautly. The top sheet would be spread over the bottom one, tucked in at the top of the bed, folded half-way down, then turned up neatly. The blankets

would be smoothed on and tucked in. The supposedly unsuspecting counselor would slide her feet in and find she couldn't stretch her legs out.

It was appropriate for the counselors to be mystified, horrified, shocked, or whatever. Later on, turnabout would be fair play when the campers had pie-beds.

When the cabin was in reasonable order, bathing suits were extracted from luggage, and everyone hightailed it down the path through the woods to the lake. Nonswimmers were consigned to the crib, a shallow area surrounded by a wooden walkway.

Kim planted herself on the dock, whistle hanging within instant reach around her neck. She realized, all of a sudden, that the waterfront counselors in her camping days had had no cinch of a job. It was scary, counting heads. One, two, three, four. . . . Blow the whistle. Call, "Buddies!" Count by pairs.

The buddies held hands and raised them high. The idea was that it would be instantly evident if anyone were missing. Everyone had a buddy except Robin, who was not chosen and who refused to choose—and Angie, who sat on the shore.

Robin was missing. Kim's heart lurched as she searched among the girls. Then footsteps pounded down the dock behind her. She had a sixth sense that something was up, and, at the last second, doubled over. Robin went sailing over her back

and into the water. She came up sputtering, furious at her dunking, even though she had intended to push Kim into the lake.

Kim blew her whistle again. "Attention, everyone. Rule number one: Never push anyone off the dock. It's dangerous. Someone might be swimming down below, and a body landing on her back might injure her seriously."

"That means you, Poison Ivy," said someone.

Robin swam after her tormentor and caught up with her perhaps fifty yards out. She grabbed and pushed her underwater. To the rescue went another camper, who dove and caught Robin by the foot, pulling her down.

"Everybody out of the water!" yelled Kim, diving in and swimming out to break up the potential disaster.

Robin was no longer trying to duck anyone; she was trying to fight her way to the surface. Kim motioned the other two away and back to shore. Robin thrashed, gulped water, went under, and thrashed some more.

Kim let her suffer long enough that she'd never forget it. When Robin finally gasped for help, she grabbed her by the wrist, swung her around, and took her to shore in a cross-chest lifesaving carry.

Grateful, Robin was not. "You almost let me drown," she accused.

"No, I did not," Kim answered. "I knew I could get you anytime I wanted. Now you know how it

feels, though. And you'd better remember rule number two: Do not ever, repeat *ever*, duck anyone, or you'll be beached for the summer."

End of the free swim, thought Kim gratefully. Tomorrow, tests would be given and campers divided into classes. They would learn technique and swim in lanes, under close supervision.

Now it was back to the cabin to get dressed for dinner. The swim had revived everyone, and now they were starved, willing to hurry, ready at first call to dash across the field. When the bugle blew mess call, Cabin Six was lined up at the door.

They sat at long tables. Tonight the counselors would wait on the campers; tomorrow they would wait on each other, working in teams, taking turns. Everyone stood up when Mrs. Dixon entered. They remained standing while one of the counselors said grace. Then they attacked the food, clattering dishes, asking for seconds of chicken and blueberry muffins and milk. Even the salad and vegetables disappeared.

Afterward a council meeting was held, so Mrs. Dixon could explain the camp routine and rules. The first item under discussion was the point chart, displayed on one wall of the mess hall. The campers' names were listed at the left. The chart was divided into eight one-week sections, with headings such as inspection, names of various sports, attitude toward others, and improvement in general.

"The counselors will mark each one of you each week," she said. "At the end of each week, at campfire, the results will be read."

"Prison. Concentration camp," muttered Robin.

"At the end of the season," the director continued, "we have a banquet. Awards are given for the best all-around camper, the tennis champion, and so on.

"We also have daily inspection of the cabins," she went on. "At the end of the week, again at campfire, the banner will be awarded to the cabin with the highest rating at inspection. That means beds must be properly made, belongings put away neatly, floors cleaned."

"Nobody's going to make me clean any old cabin," Robin hissed.

"We can," announced Liz, one of her cabin mates. "If you don't help, we'll give you the freeze."

Robin was asking for the freeze, Kim thought, and ten to one she'd get it, sooner or later. Everyone would stop talking to her. They would look right through her, as if she no longer existed. It was a rough but surprisingly effective punishment, administered by one's peers.

The threat was temporarily averted. The bugle sounded first call, and the campers trooped out, to line up facing the flagpole. The bugler signaled attention, and then, as she sounded retreat, the flag was lowered and folded into a neat triangle.

"To celebrate the opening of camp, we'll have a campfire and a marshmallow roast," announced Mrs. Dixon. "There will be initiation ceremonies for the older girls, after the little ones have gone to bed. Everyone is required to wear a sweater. Camp dismissed."

They reassembled, a few minutes later, at the campfire site beyond the tennis courts, for what Kim knew was going to start the season with a real blast. Initiation ceremonies were something else, with spine-tingling chills and a real Indian.

Well, anyway, Tom Wilkins was half-Indian, Kim told herself. He played in a band at a local resort hotel for a living, but, as Running Deer, he put on some really memorable shows at Camp Algonquin.

The older girls shivered in anticipation as they spread their ground cloths around the ceremonial fire. Traditionally, they never clued in the new girls about what was to come later.

Mrs. Dixon held a match to the kindling wood. As the fire flared and licked at the logs, Kim produced her accordion, which she had shipped to Algonquin along with her luggage, and began to play, softly, "Kumbaya." That was a pretty good starter; almost everyone knew it, even the new girls.

She went on to "Billy Boy," "Blow the Man Down," "Camptown Races," and other old favorites, until the fire burned down to embers. Now it

was time to toast the marshmallows.

Little girls, with eyes bigger than their stomachs, set out to cook them to a golden turn, offered the blackened results to the counselors, and resolutely ate some themselves. Fingers and faces were sticky with black and white goo. Kim glanced at Mrs. Dixon, to share a grin of resignation, but the director was staring into the fire, her face drawn.

Her expression seemed almost like an unconscious reprimand—as if Mrs. Dixon, at least, wasn't forgetting the responsibility for Robin. Kim felt her own face tighten.

The littlest ones, their eyelids drooping, were led off to be bedded down in Cabin One, although they protested that they were wide-awake and wanted to stay for initiation. The older girls sang them off: "Now run along home and jump into bed/Say your prayers and cover your head/The very last thing I say unto you is/You dream of me and I'll dream of you."

Kim kept playing, and the girls who had been to camp before sang enthusiastically. It was a conspiracy to keep the new girls from looking away from the campfire circle. Any minute now, Running Deer would come slithering silently through the long grass, on his stomach, propelled by his elbows.

Suddenly he leaped into the circle, with a bloodcurdling yell that produced frantic shrieks.

Even Kim, who had seen the entrance many times, jumped.

He looked like a real savage, bare to the waist except for the quiver of arrows slung on his back, and his face hideous with war paint. He brandished his bow as dramatically as if it were a tomahawk.

As the warrior circled, faster and faster, Kim glanced at the faces of the audience. Mrs. Dixon's theory was that a delicious scare could forestall homesickness and, eventually, promote a feeling of security. The fierce Indian brave, during initiation ceremonies, became a friend and protector. So far, it had not backfired.

The initial shrieks now gave way to gasps and shivers of delight—except from Robin, who just stared impassively at the proceedings.

"You're not a real Indian," she sneered. As usual, Robin was working out a plot of her own. She waited until Running Deer circled in front of her, then stuck out her foot.

He leaped over the obstacle and whirled, grabbing Robin by the ponytail and dragging her away from the fire.

At least six people screamed. Kim clapped a hand over her own mouth as a ghastly thought struck her.

How did they know this was really Running Deer? Granted, he had pulled the same stunt on other occasions, to add spice to his show, but he

always grabbed a counselor, one who had been warned in advance.

Suppose an impostor, a kidnapper, had taken Running Deer's place. It would be easy to paint someone up. In the flickering light of the fire, no one would know the difference—until Robin was gone.

Kim leaped to her feet, clutching her only weapon, a flashlight. She could have saved her strength; Robin twisted around, even though this added to the pull against her hair, and bit. Her captor let go and stalked off into the darkness.

"What about initiation?" wailed someone. "Will he come back?"

"I doubt it," Mrs. Dixon said dryly. "Never mind. We'll have initiation at a later date."

"It's all your fault, Poison Ivy," snapped one girl.

"Too bad he didn't scalp you," muttered another. "Will Running Deer come back tomorrow?"

Kim, for one, doubted it. If an impostor had been here tonight, the real Running Deer wouldn't know about the fiasco. If the real Indian had been here, he would harbor his resentment of the offense to his dignity.

"All right, girls," said Mrs. Dixon, "form the friendship circle, and we'll sing taps."

No one was anxious to clasp Robin's hands, so Kim and Jan stepped in. They were rewarded with fingernail digs.

The fire was doused, ground cloths were gathered, and the campers headed toward their roosts, giving Robin a wide berth. They were allowed ten minutes to brush their teeth, get into pajamas, and say their prayers.

The lights were turned out with the first clear note of the bugle. Taps echoed in the mountains, like a blessing.

Kim was exhausted enough to go to bed along with the campers. She uttered an appropriate groan when her feet hit the short sheet, heard satisfied snickers, then solved her problem by pushing the top sheet down. At that point, she could have slept on a bed of nails. The next day, she decided, would be time enough to think the Running Deer thing through.

Somebody sniffled.

"Shut up, crybaby," said Robin.

Kim stifled a sigh, dragged her weary bones out of her bunk, and went to sit on Angie's cot. "It's natural to have butterflies in your stomach," she said, hoping the others were listening, too. "If you know it's normal, you can live with it for two or three days. Then the butterflies go away of their own accord."

"Why did my mother send me to camp if she knew I'd be so miserable?" wept Angie.

"She sent you because she loves you and wants you to have a good time," Kim said. "The point is, you'll never live a full life if you don't learn to

stand on your own two feet.”

“Baloney,” scoffed Robin. “We’re all here because our parents wanted to get rid of us. And we didn’t choose to come, so don’t give me that garbage, either. I’ve heard it all before.”

“Most of us did choose to come,” Kim retorted. “I chose to come.”

“That’s different,” said Robin. “You’re getting paid for it.”

The child really *was* dreadful. Kim elected to ignore her comments.

“About butterflies, Angie—the idea is to learn to fight back,” Kim continued. “If you mope around on your bunk all day, the butterflies will win, and you’ll give up and go home. The next time you go away, it’ll be worse, and after a while you won’t be able to go away *ever*. You’ll be tied to your mother’s apron strings for good.”

“My mother never wore an apron in her life,” announced Robin. “We have a maid. We have *three* maids.”

“Poison Ivy is no good,” intoned a camper.

“Chop her up for firewood,” chimed in the others, from their bunks.

Kim was tempted to second the motion but returned her attention to Angie. “If you keep busy with camp activities, the butterflies will give up and go away,” she said. “You’ll win. And, honestly, wouldn’t it be awful if you were, say, twenty years old and you couldn’t go away to college because

you kept crying for your mommy?"

Someone giggled. "Wouldn't it be awful if you got married and then you kept crying for your mommy and had to go back home?"

"Or if you were elected the first woman president, but you couldn't live in the White House because. . . ."

"Or the first woman astronaut and you couldn't blast off into space because. . . ."

The suggestions grew wilder and wilder, until everyone was laughing. Kim got back into bed and lay there listening to the snickers petering out, then to the silence as tired youngsters dropped off to sleep.

Kim herself went out like a light. She didn't see or hear the small figure slide from the bunk above her and creep out the door.

5 mysterious horseman

Someone or something pushed Kim. "Go away, you silly horse," she mumbled. "How did you get in here, anyway?"

"Kim," whispered Jan, "wake up! Some of the kids sneaked outside. I think they've gone for a moonlight swim."

Kim grabbed the flashlight from under her pillow, snatched the raincoat hanging on a hook beside her bunk, and shoved her bare feet into her moccasins. Her heart pounded so hard she thought it would waken any campers who were not involved in the escapade.

She and Jan made a quick bed check. Six girls were missing. Worst of all, one of them was Robin.

Angie was still awake. Kim put her in charge of the cabin.

"I don't know how to be in charge," Angie objected. "Besides, if you go away, I'll be scared."

"You're in charge because you're using a counselor's cot, and don't you *dare* complicate things by being afraid. You tell the kids, if they wake up, that they're all on their honor. Nobody is to leave this cabin."

If anything happened to any of the campers, Kim knew she'd never forgive herself. Thank goodness for Jan. Thank goodness she hadn't been too tired to hear the stealthy noises in the night. Thank goodness Jan had arrived by car and had avoided the fatigue of the train trip, so she hadn't slept so soundly.

Watching out for roots that might trip them and send them sprawling, the two counselors raced down the path to the lake. Kim wanted to blow her whistle and shout, but she knew that would only make matters worse. If she roused the entire camp, there would be more than six girls running around loose in the darkness.

She felt light-headed with relief when they pelted down to the shoreline. Giggling little girls were just peeling off their pj's, preparing to go skinny dipping.

"Okay, hold it!" Jan said sharply. "Line up."

Kim's heart stopped. There were only five of them. Robin was not there. "Back to the cabin, on the double," she ordered. She knew, with a sinking sensation, that there was nothing to do now but to herd these kids in, leave them with Jan, and go to Mrs. Dixon. It would be up to the director to decide what came next.

It would be proof that Kim had failed. That wasn't the point, however. All that mattered now was finding Robin.

What sounded like a herd of wild horses came

pounding toward them as they filed up the path. The campers shrank back, terrified. Someone off in the trees let out a muffled shriek.

"Oh, you idiot horse," said Kim, collapsing against Mike's flank as he came to a stop beside them. Then she charged into the trees and collared Robin, who came along willingly as Kim and Mike led the way to Cabin Six.

Mike refused to let anyone go into the cabin. He planned to lead the way in.

"Hold his halter, Jan," said Kim. "Don't any of you kids move. I'll go inside and get a lump of sugar for him, and then he'll go back to the pasture, where he belongs."

She stepped inside and was inundated by icy water. It left her breathless and sputtering. It took her one second to realize what had happened, another second to realize the significance of the feigned snores in the cabin, and a third second to remember pulling the same stunt on counselors: You balance a bucket of water on the ledge over the door and tie a string from the bucket's handle to the doorknob. When a counselor opens the door, the bucket tips and drenches the victim. Mission accomplished! *Thank heaven for the raincoat*, Kim thought.

"I'm s-s-sorry. I c-c-couldn't help it," wept Angie.

"It's okay," said Kim, glancing at the girl in the beam of her flashlight. Then she laughed, because Angie wasn't weeping at all; she was laughing so

hard the tears streamed down her face. It was worth a soaking to see a homesick kid cured and caught up in the innocent deviltry that was so much a part of camp spirit.

"You're not mad, are you?" Angie asked, worried. "Muffin said you wouldn't be, that you're a good sport. She said she could tell. She . . . she's my friend. I don't even care if they all call me 'Angular.'"

"A nickname is a sign of friendship," Kim said. "They used to call me 'Dim Kim.' And they call Barbie 'Barbarian.' And there's 'Dizzy Lizzie' and 'Skinny Dinny.' It's all in fun."

Angular snuggled under the covers, announced that she was going on a diet, and closed her eyes. Kim located a lump of sugar, fed Mike and sent him home, and shooed the campers into their bunks.

"Now hear this," she said when they were all bedded down. "The show is over for tonight. No more shenanigans, or you'll be docked for a week."

She towel-dried her hair, crawled back into her bunk, and listened to the breathing of youngsters who were too tired to stay awake another minute. It seemed as if she had just barely closed her eyes when reveille sounded.

The two counselors got up, washed, dressed, then routed the sleepyheads from their cozy nests. While the kids were getting dressed, they pieced together last night's misadventure.

"Correction: a near miss," Jan said. "Apparently Robin went out first, probably just to be ornery—and that is some ornery kid! The others didn't realize who went out but just figured it was the signal for a skinny dip, and they didn't want to miss out."

Robin, Kim figured, had hidden in the woods. Maybe she planned to be missed, so Kim would have to go looking around all night, with Robin keeping just out of sight while she had a good laugh. But Mike had sensed Kim was near and had entered the picture. Robin, scared silly, had cried out and given herself away.

"Some kid," Kim agreed. "It looks as if I'm going to have to spend most of my time watchdogging her. That'll give you most of the responsibility for the rest of the cabin. Do you mind?" If Jan went along with that idea, there would be no need to explain further about Robin.

Jan leaped at the chance. "Just remember, you volunteered," she said, grinning. "Okay, you kids, teeth all brushed, hair all combed?"

"Will you braid me?" asked Muffin, handing her hairbrush to Kim and turning her back.

"Want me to ponytail you?" Kim asked Robin, when she finished with Muffin.

"I'll do it myself," snapped Robin.

First call sounded, and they went scampering out to join campers from other cabins, all running to line up and stand at attention as the bugler

played "To the Colors" and the flag was raised. Then they trooped into the dining hall.

After breakfast came bunk duty, inspection, arts and crafts, and sports. The girls of Cabin Six took riding tests and were placed in the proper classes in horsemanship.

Robin made herself even more unpopular, if such a thing were possible, by sneering at the Western saddles. "I ride English," she announced. "I know dressage. I ride in horse shows, and I have plenty of blue ribbons to prove it. My parents own purebred horses."

"Poison Ivy," retorted Liz, "you make me sick." Several of the other girls got into the act by scratching their imaginary itches. The die was cast; Robin was a marked girl.

For two cents, I'd put you in the beginners' class, just to take you down a peg, Kim thought. She couldn't, however, because it was a fact that the girl had a good seat and, surprisingly, good hands. If she had yanked the reins or sawed her mount's mouth with the bit, Kim could have demoted her.

As it turned out, a horse gave Robin her comeuppance. After she had been assigned to the advanced group, she demanded the right to ride Mike around the ring. Kim agreed, but Mike didn't. He spun around and refused to let her mount.

"There's supposed to be a groom to hold him," said Robin haughtily, "and another groom to help me mount. You hold him."

"No way," said Kim calmly. "Everyone in the advanced group has to be able to mount without assistance. Beginners and intermediates get help."

Robin was all set to argue the point, but lunch-time intervened. Everyone had to get cleaned up and answer mess call.

There were a few minor skirmishes during the meal. Robin announced she was not going to wait on tables, ever. She was told she would take the second week's shift or go hungry, and she said she'd starve, then, because the food was horrible, anyway. To prove her point, she picked up her dessert, chocolate pudding with whipped cream, and brought it up to her nose to smell it. Someone pushed her face into it, of course.

Mrs. Dixon, seated at the head table with her secretary and the camp nurse, tapped a knife against her water glass, signaling for silence. "That will be enough," she said in her best school-teacherish voice.

"Now then, girls," she continued, rising, "you will go to your cabins for rest hour. The counselors will pass out postcards. Each one of you is to write a message to your parents saying that you arrived safely and that you are enjoying camp."

She dismissed the camp but motioned for Kim to remain behind. "You had a phone call during the morning. I told the . . . ah . . . gentleman that you were unavailable during activities but that he could call back at twelve forty-five. You may take

the call in my office, if you wish."

The gentleman turned out to be Kevin Clark. "What's your day off?" he asked. "I thought I could arrange for the same day. We could go to Lake George, go for a swim, take a speedboat ride or something, have dinner, see a movie. . . ."

It sounded so great that Kim wanted to jump at the chance. One day, maybe one day a week, away from Robin could preserve her sanity, and one day a week with Kevin sounded really appealing. There was no getting around the fact that she was attracted to him, and she didn't want to discourage his apparent interest in her. After all, there were many other counselors, too, at Camp Algonquin. . . .

On the other hand, she didn't see how she could possibly take *any* time off. Just sending Robin to the cabin unaccompanied made Kim nervous. Jan had said she'd keep an eagle eye on her, but the responsibility was really Kim's.

"I don't know what day I'll be off," she said reluctantly.

"You couldn't grab a couple of hours off today, could you?" he persisted.

"Not possibly. I'm slated for a trail ride on Tongue Mountain, with supper out."

"Sounds like fun, unless you're taking the little monster along. Are you? How is she, by the way?" he asked.

"Monstrous," said Kim. "And, yes, she's go-

ing along on the trail ride."

Kevin said he'd call her in a couple of days, that he didn't give up easily, and that he planned to see her soon, for which Kim was thankful. She hung up and went back to her cabin to do her duty: reading the cards the kids were writing home.

The purpose of proofreading the messages was not to spy but to avert complications and misunderstandings. She remembered a card written by a homesick girl years ago. It said, "I have appendicitis. Come quickly. I'm dying." The stomachache turned out to be butterflies that would have gone away, except that the sight of the distraught mother, too early in the season, proved the girl's undoing. She went home.

Kim herself had written a few gems: "I stepped on a rusty nail at the barn. It didn't go all the way through my foot. Love, Kim" and "I almost won the diving cup, but I came too close to the board and smashed my nose. Love, Kim."

This day, Angie had created a treasure: "Dear Mother, the food is awful and I love it. The butterflies are better. Love, Angular."

"Um," mused Kim, "I don't get it."

"I mean, I don't like the food. I don't like eggs for breakfast, and I'd rather have hamburgers for lunch, but I love camp," explained Angie.

Kim suggested it might be better to say that she was having fun at camp and was glad she

had come and that she was going on a trail ride—and sign it “Angela.” She could surprise her mother on visitors’ day with how she had dieted away those extra pounds.

Robin had written her letter on stationery and had sealed it in an envelope, so no one could read it. Kim let it go, rather than rising to the bait and being told that mail was censored only in concentration camps. It was addressed to a Mrs. Thomas Clark at the Van Alstyne’s New York address.

“How about the letter to your parents?” Kim asked.

“They’re in Europe.”

“Do you know their address?” Kim pursued.

“None of your business.”

Kim really felt sorry for her. The poor kid didn’t even know her parents’ whereabouts, apparently. She had nobody to write to except the housekeeper. She tried to put a friendly arm around Robin’s shoulders, but the girl shrugged it off and proceeded to dress for the trail ride. She put on white linen breeches, black boots, a white shirt, and a dark riding coat, topping it all off with a black hat. Complete with a crop, it was the perfect outfit for show riding.

The other kids dressed in jeans and short boots. They poked fun at Robin, and she jeered at them.

There were twelve campers slated for the ride, with Kim and Jan as the counselors. The contingent headed for the barn.

Each girl was supposed to saddle her own horse. Once again Robin announced that she would ride Mike, but once again Mike disagreed. He refused the bit, so Kim claimed him for herself and assigned Robin to a black mare named Tippy.

Kim and Jan checked the girths, punching each horse in the ribs to make him exhale so the straps could be cinched up enough to keep the saddles from slipping. When the girls were mounted up, the two counselors checked stirrup lengths, made the necessary adjustments, and then passed out supplies. The cook had already packed the food in saddlebags, which were slung in place. Each girl carried her own canteen of water.

Kim, aboard Mike, would lead. Jan, on Scout, would bring up the rear. They moved out, walking along the side of the road leading into the camp. A mile farther on, they turned to the left and broke into a trot on a dirt road. Robin tried to pass Kim and kick her horse into a canter, but Kim caught the bridle and ordered her back.

"Do that again, my friend," she said, "and I'll take you all the way back to camp and ground you."

They pulled up when they reached a brook. "We'll ford it one by one," Kim said. "I'll go first. Remember, if your horse slips or stumbles, pull his head up."

Mike picked his way across, testing the stones, finding good footing. Kim motioned for Robin to

take the next turn crossing.

Muffin was next. Her horse refused. "Come on," begged the redhead. "Please!"

There was nothing to do but to go back and lead her across, Kim decided. She turned back, and suddenly hooves pounded. She swung in her saddle and, horrified, saw Robin galloping off.

This was the worst yet! If Kim raced up behind Robin and Tippy, Tippy would extend herself and gallop faster—and all the other horses would follow at a gallop! Campers could be thrown in all directions. Somebody could be fatally injured that way.

But how could she just let Robin go? Even if, admittedly, she was a skilled rider, she was only twelve. Once that horse really got going, she might not have the strength to pull her in.

Or worse, suppose Robin hadn't done this on purpose. Suppose somebody had put a burr under the saddle or in the saddle blanket, as a deliberate maneuver to make Robin's horse bolt, to separate her from the group.

Kim would have to go after her. "Hold your horse right there, Muffin," she ordered. "He doesn't want to cross, so he'll block the others. All of you, hold your horses in tight and don't loosen up the reins, or they'll all bolt. Jan. . . ."

"Go. I'll handle things here," snapped Jan.

Kim wheeled Mike around, pulled him in, then let him out suddenly, kicking him in the flank at

the same time. He went from a standing start to a canter, skipping the trot altogether, and then into a gallop.

"Go, boy, go," Kim begged. "Faster."

Mike threw his heart into the chase. He was taller than Tippy, and his strides were longer. Now Tippy was in sight.

From the back, Robin looked scared. Her elbows were beginning to flop. Kim could see daylight between the girl and the saddle.

"Hang on," Kim yelled. "Use your knees, your *knees*, girl. Pull her in. Saw her mouth if you have to."

Robin vanished around a turn in the dirt road. Kim flicked her reins against Mike's neck, begging him to *go, go faster*.

He pounded along and rounded the turn, and Kim thought she was seeing double. There were *two* horses ahead of her, shoulder to shoulder.

It was not an optical illusion. The man on the big roan caught Robin's bridle, and Kim, almost sobbing with relief, started to rein Mike in. Then she brought her heel back against his flank instead. It wasn't over yet.

The idiot on the roan seemed to think he was a rodeo rider. He had an arm around Robin and looked as if he were pulling her from her saddle over to his own horse. That was for movie stunt men. They could both be killed.

Mike and Kim charged up on the right side.

"Pull your horse in," she yelled, grabbing Robin's bridle and bracing her feet in her stirrups. "Whoa, Mike. Easy!" she said. "Easy, Tippy."

For a crazy second, it seemed as if Robin's horse were being pulled forward on one side and back on the other. "Either let go or stop!" Kim ordered the other rider.

Apparently that brought the man to his senses, and all three horses came to a stop. Then Kim erupted into the fury that comes with intense relief after a fright.

"Look at your horse!" she snapped. "Don't you ever let a horse get lathered up like that again. Do you read me, Robin Van Alstyne?"

Robin's face was as white as a sheet, but she still had her thorny disposition. "Look at your own horse," she sneered.

Kim took a deep breath. "We'll walk both horses and cool them off," she said levelly. "We'll walk all the way back to join the others. For two cents, I'd put you on a lead rope, like a beginner. It would serve you right. And you'd better walk *your* horse, too," she added, over her shoulder.

There was no answer. Kim turned to give him a piece of her mind and discovered that the man on the roan was moving off in the opposite direction at a trot.

Well, good riddance. The man was a menace.

Kim's imagination pounced on the word *menace*. How come he was there? What had he really

been trying to do, make like a television hero—or seize the opportunity to kidnap Robin? Maybe he'd been shadowing Robin from the time she arrived at camp, waiting for the right time.

Maybe this group on horseback, coming out of a trail just ahead, was part of the plan, too. Kim tightened her grip on Robin's reins, ready to make a run for it. But then she looked again, collected her wits, and realized it was a bunch of kids. Campers. From Eagle Rock!

"What are you doing here?" she demanded as Kevin trotted over to join her.

"Now, that's a nice way to greet a guy who comes along to guide you girls up Tongue Mountain." Kevin grinned. His face sobered as he looked at the sweat-streaked horses. "What's going on?"

Kim wished she knew.

6 invisible net

"Do we have to take old Poison Ivy on the five-day canoe trip?" asked Liz, screwing up her face in disgust. "She spoils everything."

Kim heartily agreed with her, but she couldn't very well say so. Robin certainly did spoil everything, either deliberately or by someone else's design. With the memory of that near-disaster on horseback still fresh in her mind, Kim was not at all keen about taking the problem child, one week later, into the wild territory of the Adirondacks.

It seemed to her that such a trip was courting disaster. She still didn't know the identity of the man who had stopped Robin's runaway horse or whether or not he had caused the trouble.

After breakfast, she went to Mrs. Dixon's office to try to talk her out of the whole idea. "Don't you think it's just begging for trouble?" she asked, sinking into a chair facing the director's desk. "That kid is disaster-prone."

"Nonsense," snorted Mrs. Dixon. "She's no worse than you were at that age. You were always into something. It was one scrape after another."

"But I was only having fun. Robin does danger-

ous things on purpose, and she deliberately upsets everyone else. I feel sorry for her, yes, but I don't think one girl should be allowed to ruin—"

"When I need your opinions on how to run my camp, I'll ask for them!" Mrs. Dixon's eyes blazed.

Kim's jaw dropped. Mrs. Dixon had always been firm, but this wasn't like her. She was wound up so tightly that she was ready to snap. Obviously she, too, was worried, but she was going through with the plan to send Robin on the canoe trip, anyway.

"We agreed, *both* of us, to give Robin a normal, carefree summer. We did not say that we'd *try* to do so, if it suited our convenience, but that we *would* do so. In addition, you undertook to do a personal favor for your boss, Mr. Rydell," Mrs. Dixon reminded her. "Robin is going. The matter is settled."

The whole thing made Kim jumpy. It was all backward. It was usually she, Kim, who leaped before she looked and so wound up in some sort of a jam. This time, because it concerned someone else, she had thought a lot about it. She wanted out, and someone was forcing her to leap.

The phone rang, interrupting her thoughts. Mrs. Dixon answered it, then handed the receiver over. "It's for you."

It was Kevin again. No, she told him, she couldn't take time off. She was leaving shortly

for a canoe trip through the chain of lakes. She was sorry. Maybe they could work out something when she got back. If she got back, she added to herself.

She had committed herself, and Mrs. Dixon gave her an approving glance. "If you're still worrying about that man on horseback, just consider his appearance providential," she suggested.

"You have a point," Kim said. A coincidental appearance she could not buy, but she had prayed for help, and who was she to question the answer to her prayer? The idea brightened her spirits considerably.

"If we're going, and I guess we are, I'd better get cracking," Kim said, standing up. "We'll check out with you in about an hour."

"Very well."

There was a lot to do in a short period of time. Kim headed first for the infirmary to pick up the first aid kit. She checked it out with the nurse. Roll-up splints made of wire mesh, cravat bandages, tourniquet, Band-Aids, antiseptic, scissors, bandages, adhesive tape, aspirin, sunburn ointment, poison ivy lotion, insect repellent, gauze flats, cotton.

"Now, this is Dilantin," said the nurse, indicating a bottle. "Make sure Liz takes it according to the directions on the label. Make doubly sure."

"What's it for?" asked Kim.

"She has petit mal. That's a mild form of epi-

lepsy. Nothing to worry about."

"What?" yelped Kim.

The nurse laughed. "She hasn't had a seizure in years. She's controlled with the medication. Just check that she takes it, and you won't have any trouble. This is oral insulin for Barbie. Directions on the bottle. Read 'em."

"Hey, wait a minute," objected Kim. "It's my sister who's the nurse, not I. What am I supposed to do, take a floating infirmary on a canoe trip?"

"You'd be surprised how many controlled problems there were in your own camper days," said the nurse calmly. "And how much better the girls fare when they're treated as normal, which they are, certainly, rather than as hypochondriacs, which they could be if we encouraged that."

"You'd be surprised at how naïve I used to be," answered Kim. "I thought the counselors had it soft, just a good time all summer, with the privilege of going to the movies and out on dates."

"Well, now you know."

Kim laughed ruefully, gathered up her gear, and headed for the kitchen to check on supplies with the cook. "It beats me," she said to that rotund lady, "why counselors ever come back for a second year."

"Wait until the end of the summer, and then you'll know," Cook said cheerfully. "When you see how healthy and happy the girls are, how they've learned to give as well as take, you'll know it's all

worth the hard, worrisome times.”

“I suppose,” Kim murmured, going through the checklist of food for the five days. If Robin ever learned to give an inch, it would definitely be worthwhile. So far, she hadn’t shown signs of giving a millionth of an inch, though—not that she’d get the chance, if someone were really bent on removing her bodily from Algonquin. She shivered.

“Someone walked over your grave,” Cook said, smiling.

Why did everyone keep saying that, especially to Kim Aldrich?

“It’s just an old saying. Doesn’t mean anything,” said Cook. “It’s like saying ‘God bless you’ when someone sneezes. Everything’s here. Now, as to quantity, I figured enough for three normal meals per girl per day, and then I doubled it. They always eat twice as much when they’re on trips—probably because everything tastes so good and because they can’t think of anything else to do but eat.”

She was right on that score. Kim remembered one trip she had taken as a kid. They ate up a week’s rations in three days and had to go back to camp.

Cook said she would pack the food in the big baskets, label them according to the days of the week, and have them stowed in the camp minibus. Kim left her to the task and went back to her cabin to check bedrolls and to make sure everyone

had a ground cloth, sweater, jacket, swimsuit, spare clothing, toothbrush, and so on.

Kim put the first aid kit and her accordion on her bunk, so she wouldn't forget them, while she packed her own gear in her sleeping bag and rolled everything in her poncho. Someone reached past her.

"Hold it," Kim said. "Nobody is allowed to monkey with the first aid kit but Jan, Kiki, and me."

"I just wanted to borrow the Ivy Dry," said Liz.

"If you have poison ivy, you go see the nurse, pronto."

"I don't have poison ivy. I was going to put it on her, to make her go away," said Liz, pointing at Robin.

"Ha, ha," sneered Robin.

Jan exploded. "You're acting like a bunch of spoiled brats. For two cents, I'd call this whole trip off."

Muffin, grinning, produced two pennies, but she put them away quickly, before Jan could take her up on the offer. Then she turned away to give Angie a hand with her pack.

"Time's a-wasting," Kim remarked. "All set?"

At long last, they had their belongings stowed in the bus. Kim climbed behind the wheel, and they rolled out of camp, waved off by campers whose turns would come later.

There was a good hour's ride ahead, north on Route 9, northwest on 28, along the Hudson,

which, there, was a rushing, white-water river instead of the wide, flat expanse that flowed past New York City. They drove through North Creek, North River, and Blue Mountain Lake, climbing into virgin forest territory.

Finally they reached their point of embarkation, a small outpost near Old Forge, where there was a canoe outfitter. Since it would be their last look at civilization for five days, they went into the adjoining café for a hot meal.

The arrangements had been made ahead of time. Five aluminum canoes were reserved, to accommodate the twelve campers and three counselors.

"Do you want the shoulder harnesses or the wheels?" asked the man in charge, when the girls trooped down to the canoe slip, feeling fat and contented. "Wheels, I guess," he answered himself.

Definitely wheels, Kim agreed. She had had some experience with the harnesses, enough to last her a long time. When you came to a portage, you rigged one of the padded yokes at the bow and another at the stern of the canoe. The canoe was then hoisted, turned upside down, and carried on the shoulders of two stalwarts. It was no picnic toting that weight uphill for almost a mile on the first portage and two miles on level ground at the second—and then hiking back for your heavy pack.

Some genius had devised an easier method. Two bicycle-type wheels, which could be separated for stowing, were rigged with a sling between them. The canoe, still loaded with food and gear, rested on the sling and was pulled along the path between lakes. One person, at the stern, balanced it. It was a cinch.

Once in a while, if there was a fallen log across the trail, the canoe would have to be lifted over, but that was too seldom to be a hardship. The wheel method also prevented the type of ridiculous accident that had happened to Kim once. With her head under the bow of a canoe, she was looking down to pick her footing. Someone coming the other way on the narrow trail also had his forward vision blocked. They had crashed head on. Result: one sprained ankle and one gorgeous shiner.

Kim, Jan, and Kiki, the third counselor, directed the loading, so the canoes would be balanced. Everything fitted except the accordion, wrapped in a waterproof cover.

"If you don't mind a suggestion," said the man in charge of the canoe rental, "you might learn to play the harmonica. You could put that in your pocket."

"*Now* you tell me," Kim chuckled. "But, if you think this is bad, you should have seen me another time, climbing the fire trail at Mount Marcy. It had rained for three days, and it was as slippery

as grease. The weight of the accordion, tied to my backpack, almost tipped me backward and down into a ravine."

With a little juggling, the accordion was stowed. Now it was time to board. Each canoe would have two strong paddlers and one weak one. The bow paddlers now crawled in, holding the gunwales and going over the baggage on their hands and knees. Muffin was to paddle bow in Kim's canoe for the first lap of the trip.

"Passengers in next," Jan announced. "That means you, Robin. The first lap, you're riding with Muffin and—"

Robin grabbed a paddle and announced that she was going to paddle stern.

"That will do," said Kim, surprised at how like Mrs. Dixon's schoolteacherish tone her own sounded. It didn't work for Kim, however.

"That's not fair," said Robin. "How come you let Liz paddle stern and not me?"

"Everyone will have a turn at the bow, at the stern, and as passenger," said Kim. "Now, get in, please."

"It's not fair," repeated Robin.

"Lots of things in life are not fair," snapped Jan. "The sooner you know that, the better off you'll be."

Robin decided that she was going to take Liz's place in the stern of another canoe, whether anyone liked it or not. She charged down the slip

to push the other girl out of the way.

Kim had had it up to the eyeballs. She put out her foot, and Robin landed in the lake.

"If you hadn't done it, I would have," applauded Jan. "Shape up or ship out, I always say," she told Robin as she came up sputtering.

"Now look what you've done." She glared at Kim as she climbed back onto the canoe slip. "I'll probably catch pneumonia, and it'll be all your fault."

"Pooh," answered Kim, unsympathetically. "It's a hot, sunny day. You'll dry out." *Meanwhile, you might try drying up*, she added to herself.

Jan bent forward over the stern of her canoe, grabbed the gunwales, put one foot in, and shoved off. She settled down on the webbed stern seat, took the canoe out, and turned it broadside to wait for the others. The second canoe shoved off, then the third. The four canoes lined up to wait for Kim's.

She turned back to make one last check. The minibus was parked safely; the keys were in her pocket. No baggage had been left on the dock.

At that point, a car pulled up in front of the canoe outfitter's, and three men got out. Kim had an odd feeling that one of them was vaguely familiar, although she couldn't quite place him.

"Come on," begged one of the campers.

She was still puzzling about the man, when she wheeled around, not paying attention to her

footing. She slipped on the wet ramp and went flying into the ice-cold lake.

That brought a laugh from everyone, and Robin was highly satisfied.

"Serves you right," she said. "I hope you like it."

It did serve her right, and Kim was willing to be the first to admit it. Grinning and dripping, she crawled back to the ramp.

The three men had unloaded gear from their car. They were talking to the canoe outfitter and gesturing to the slip. Now they were coming closer. At this range, Kim was positive she recognized one of them. For some reason, she felt compelled to remember who he was.

Take the battered old fishing hat off, she mused. Dress him in jeans and boots instead of khaki shorts and moccasins. Put him on a horse, at the beginning of the trail leading up Tongue Mountain. . . .

Her heart did a flip. She couldn't be sure, because she hadn't really looked too carefully at the man who had grabbed Robin's runaway horse, but he looked enough like this man to spook her. Maybe if she got a closer look she could tell.

"I'll be right with you, kids," she called. "Have to go back and make sure I locked the doors of the bus."

Her announcement was greeted by groans. Bored, someone flicked a paddle blade across the

water and splashed someone. Someone retaliated.

Kim ran, knowing that the patience of twelve-year-olds is mighty short. Any second now, there would be a full-fledged water fight . . . everyone soaked to the skin. Naturally, sooner or later, one of the canoes would capsize.

Either accidentally or by design, the man she wanted a closer look at turned his back just as she got near. He was busily engaged in handing over money to the canoe attendant. Face still averted, he carried his pack down to the ramp.

Kim had to follow through and check the doors of the bus. When she got back to the slip, she had a distinct feeling that the man had been talking to, of all people, Robin Van Alstyne, even though now he was putting his gear into a canoe.

"Did he say anything to you?" she asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" retorted Robin.

The man and his two companions shoved off and paddled away. They did not glance back.

"Who was that?" Kim asked the attendant.

He shrugged. "Never saw him before in my life. Funny thing, he asked who you were, too. Not you, just what camp you were from."

Kim felt as if she were caught in some sort of invisible net. Was that man pushing on ahead so he could pick a good spot and then jump them and grab Robin? Or was he a perfectly innocent man on holiday, someone she, too, had never seen before in her life and would never see again?

Twenty minutes was long enough for any of the campers to paddle bow. True, the stern paddler bore more responsibility, because it was up to her to control the direction of the canoe, but the bow position was more tiring.

Kim checked her watch, blew her whistle, and signaled for all the boats to line up for the first changeover. While she waited for them to draw abreast, she sniffed the wonderful fragrance of fresh mountain air and, yes, balsam, mingled with the smell of pine trees.

"Now hear this," she said when everyone was at close range. "There will be no horsing around. Okay, before you remind me that we didn't bring a single horse, you know what I mean. No clowning. Do you read me, loud and clear?"

"Crowded near," chirped Muffin.

"Proud and sincere," suggested Liz.

"Bowed in fear," Barbie chimed in.

"Endowed with cheer," was Angie's amiable contribution.

"In a shroud, in my bier," said Robin.

The little ghoul! thought Kim, shuddering in-

wardly, hoping the girl hadn't accidentally come close to an ultimate truth.

"Okay, let's get on with the show. You've all practiced changing paddlers, back at camp. We'll start with Jan's canoe. The rest of you co-mediennes watch." Kim kept her tone light.

The bow paddler in Jan's canoe swung around in her seat. Cautiously, hands on the gunwales, she began working her way aft. When she met the passenger, seated on the baggage, she lifted up enough for the passenger to crawl under her. The passenger crawled forward.

"No," Jan said to her new bow paddler. "Don't turn around in your seat yet. Pick up your paddle and face the stern for the moment. For a couple of seconds, you're going to be without a stern paddler. Since the bow and stern are the same shape, you can act as a temporary stern paddler and control the direction of the canoe. Got it?"

It wasn't really vital to have a stern paddler for that short period of time, here on the placid water of the lake, Kim knew. But it was better to do it correctly every time, until it became second nature. If the girls were on a river, some other time, or if a storm came up here, it would be safer to have the boat under control at all times. Safety was a good habit to encourage; it might even rub off into other areas.

The new paddler was ready in the bow. Now the original bow paddler, waiting amidships,

continued to work her slow way to the stern. Jan slipped from her seat, scrunched down low, and went under the girl's legs, to the center of the canoe. She was now the passenger, and the original bow paddler was at the stern.

"Just like leapfrog," remarked someone.

"Without the leap, and don't you forget it, my friend," said Kim.

The new bow paddler turned to face forward. The first canoe was set to go, waiting only until the others, one by one, completed the maneuver. Kim was now the passenger in her canoe, with Robin at the bow and Muffin at the stern. She could trust Muffin, a seasoned camper, but she planned to keep a close eye on Robin, in case she came up with one of her brilliant ideas about how to endanger her life and that of others.

Robin set out to show everyone up, reaching well forward, digging her paddle in, and pulling with all her strength. At that rate, she wouldn't last five minutes, and Kim decided to keep quiet and let her find out her own mistake.

She was too stubborn to give in. Switching her paddle from right to left, she kept at it, until even the back of her neck looked red.

"Take it easy, Robin," Kim said at last, unwilling to have a heat exhaustion case on her hands. She also knew, because she had been a stubborn child herself, that sometimes, when a kid took a stand, it was practically impossible for her to back down.

It was up to someone else to keep her off the hook.

"You think I can't paddle this stupid old canoe?" gasped Robin.

"You've already proved that you can," Kim told her, "but you have to save some strength. You'll be paddling stern on the next shift." *If you don't raise blisters as big as golf balls*, she added to herself. "Now, easy does it. Easy. That's an order, hear?"

Robin took two more strokes, pulling hard, to prove she could still do it, then she shipped her paddle and peeled off her shirt. She had a swimsuit under her clothes. "It's hot," she said. "I'm going for a swim."

"You sit down," roared Kim. "Nobody is going to swim from a loaded canoe. We'll beach the canoes later and swim. For now, sit down and stop rocking the boat."

"Let's keelhaul her," called Liz. "We ought to push her in, tie her to the stern, and . . . and take her down the white-water part of the Hudson and bounce her over a few rocks. She'd be right at home, because she has rocks of her own, in her head."

"Oh, go fry a marble," retorted Robin. "Only you can't, because you've lost all your marbles."

Jan, sensing the need for a quick diversion, broke into song: "In a cavern, in a canyon, excavating for a mine/Dwelt a miner, forty-niner, and

his daughter Clementine." She waved in rhythm.

"Oh, my darling, oh, my darling, oh, my darling Clementine/You are lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry, Clementine," chimed in the others.

"Light she was, and like a fairy, and her shoes were number nine/Herring boxes without topses, sandals were for Clementine. . . ."

Kim sang along mechanically. Her mind was on something else. She should have pursued the matter of the man at the canoe landing. The attendant had said he didn't know him, but he would have had to have a name and address, in case the man failed to return the canoe.

The more she thought about him, the more she was convinced that he was the same man she had seen so briefly on the trail ride. She should have gotten his name; not that it would have done much good, because if he *were* a criminal, he would have given a phony name. But he might be on record, with an alias. . . .

Stupid! Instead of finding out everything she could at the time, she had turned her back and let him get away. And she, Kim Aldrich, had continued the trail ride, deluding herself that everything was okay, just because Kevin and his Eagles had joined the Algonquins.

Speaking of Indians, Kim reminded herself, how about Running Deer? He had grabbed Robin. Why? Because she had tried to trip him? Mrs. Dixon said he had an Indian's hidden anger at

the mere hint of an insult. That was the most obvious explanation, but, as Dan Aldrich always said, it paid to look beyond the obvious.

Put war paint on the man who had grabbed Robin's runaway horse; think of him as trying to lead her away at a breakneck speed, rather than trying to stop her. Put war paint on the canoeist. . . . They were both about the same size, both lithe and agile. . . .

How to drive yourself up the wall, without really trying, Kim told herself scornfully. Nonetheless, she wished she had a weapon—a pistol or a rifle. Oh, sure, she had a hunting knife and a Swiss army knife with all the gadgets, but a gun would be better.

Except, she amended, Robin would probably find it and, showing off, pull the trigger without checking.

"I didn't know the gun was loaded," sang the kids, as if on cue, "and I'm so sorry, my friend/ I didn't know the gun was loaded, and I'll never, never do it again."

"Hey, what's that flag doing over there?" asked Muffin. "There's a house, sort of, too. I thought you said we wouldn't see any houses at all."

It was a ranger station, Kim explained. Other such stations were situated at intervals along their route. "If you ever get in trouble in the wilderness area, go to the nearest ranger station. You can follow the shore, and sooner or later you'll come—"

"Big deal," snorted Robin. Her voice changed into a perfect imitation of Mrs. Dixon's. "If you're ever lost in the woods or in trouble, go to the nearest ranger station."

Kim laughed in spite of herself. The monster child really was clever. If she'd only use her brain to get with it, instead of against everyone, she'd be a winner. She had a real talent, and maybe, just maybe, old Poison Ivy could be reached through it. If she could be encouraged to do take-offs, not maliciously but in fun, she'd be a hit. The cutting edge would have to go, of course.

"Old Sourpuss said that line about the ranger station a million times. I'm sick of it," Robin said.

Okay, shelve the takeoff idea for the moment. Kim suggested that they beach their canoes and go to meet the ranger in person.

He was a tall, deeply tanned man, who greeted them cordially and showed the kids around. The shortwave radio intrigued them for a few moments. It was, he explained, for emergencies. He could call headquarters for help, or if headquarters had news of anyone missing in the woods, he would be notified.

Yes, he said in answer to a question, he raised the flag every morning at eight and lowered it every evening at sundown. No, he didn't have a bugle or even a recording of bugle calls; he did it in silence. It was a government facility and, as such, must fly the flag, even if no one was around

to see it or appreciate the fact.

"It's there, though, to guide anyone in trouble to the station," he said.

"Big deal," repeated Robin. Liz kicked her in the shin.

"If you ladies would like to use my cabin to change into bathing suits, I'll take a walk and give you some privacy. You can call me when the coast is clear. I ought to warn you, though, that the barometer's falling. There's a chance of rain later. You might want to push on and get your camp set up."

They took a vote and decided to keep going. There was a portage ahead, and they wanted to get that behind them and then head for an island, with a log lean-to, that the ranger told them about.

He waved good-bye, and, in her heart, Kim wished they could stay close to the station for the night. It was creepy knowing they were going to put a portage between them and the law.

When they reached the portage, several of the kids groaned, "It's practically straight uphill."

"Count your blessings," Kim advised. "Try carrying the canoes on your shoulders, and then you'll know what the Indians had to go through. We've got wheels."

Rigging the wheels wasn't any lead-pipe cinch, however. The two wheels for each canoe had to be positioned and strapped on at the balance point, taking into consideration the baggage.

Then the real job began. They had to pull the awkward things uphill and, when they stopped to catch a breath, make sure the canoes didn't get away and go careening back down.

It turned out to be too much for the girls, so their packs were unloaded and boosted to their backs. They climbed the trail, dumped their gear in a pile, and went back for the now lightened canoes.

It took them nearly two hours of dogged carrying, climbing, and pulling to get the job done. They were too exhausted to paddle without a refreshing swim. Rigging a bathhouse of ponchos, finding swimsuits, swimming, changing into dry clothes, and reloading the canoes took the better part of another hour.

Kim glanced uneasily at the sky. It was beginning to cloud up.

"Let's go; let's go," she urged. "On the double." Despite protests, she ordered the strong paddlers to work. "Everyone will have plenty of time for all positions before the trip is over," she reminded them. "The objective right now is to reach that island and get organized before the rain."

They almost made it, but the heavens opened when they were still a hundred yards from shore. The lean-to the ranger had told them about was on top of a miniature mountain.

"Run for it, kids," said Jan as they beached the canoes. "Grab your gear, and go stake a claim to

that shelter. Then get out your ponchos and come back and help unload the food and stuff."

With all the shelters scattered along the chain of lakes and on the mountains in the wild area, it was a question of "first come, first served." In this case, the girls from Camp Algonquin had missed out. They came back, dripping wet, to announce there was somebody there—men.

"Well, then, I'll just go and ask them to be good sports and let us have it," Kim said. "Meanwhile, turn the canoes over and crawl under them."

She hiked up the trail, reasonably sure the men would agree that a group of little girls shouldn't spend the night out in the rain, especially on the first day of a long canoe trip. It would be a mess; everything would be sopping wet, and their clothes might not dry out for ages.

The plan had called for staying in lean-tos if they hit bad weather. True, they could always rig makeshift shelters out of ponchos and ground cloths, but that was better for good weather. They hadn't brought tents, because there just wasn't enough room in the canoes.

A couple of men surely wouldn't mind. . . .

There were three of them, sitting comfortably under cover. They had a poncho rolled up over the open side of the shelter, ready to be dropped if the wind shifted. They had all the comforts of home, and they were enjoying them.

Their sleeping bags were spread out on pine boughs. They had a Coleman stove for cooking, so they didn't have to worry about how to cook over an open fire in the rain. They even had a clothesline strung up, under cover, where they were drying socks and bathing trunks.

But the worst part of all was that Kim recognized them as the same men who had left the canoe landing just ahead of the Algonquin group.

"We meet again," said one of them.

Kim was stopped cold for the moment. She wished she knew whether they were meeting, however casually, for the second or the third time.

"Coffee?" asked another.

"How about a drink?" asked the third. "You look as if you could use one. You look like a drowned kitten."

"Look," Kim said, "I don't quite know how to ask you this, but—"

"But you want us to vacate the premises and turn them over to you," Kim's suspect said.

"Something like that," she admitted.

"No good," said Mr. X, as Kim mentally dubbed him, for lack of a better name. "There isn't room for more than six people inside here, if anyone wanted to lie down. You've got fifteen; I counted them."

"It really wouldn't work," put in the second man. "If six of the youngsters were given the lean-to, that would leave the rest out, and there'd

be a lot of bickering. Better to let them all have equal time outdoors."

"Tell you what, though," said the third. "They can all pile in here and get into dry clothes. We'll take a walk in our rain gear. They can even cook their dinner on our stove."

"But sleep in here, no," said Mr. X. "Anyway, if you have any trouble about that, remind them of women's lib. If they get a little wet, I doubt that they'll shrink."

It was better than nothing—a lot better than nothing. Kim took them up on their offer and went back to get her charges.

They left their supplies stashed under the canoes and toted their personal gear to the shelter. True to their word, their hosts dropped the tent flap for them and then went away while the girls peeled their wet things off. There was no hope of drying the sopping garments, so they were all crammed into one duffel bag, to prevent loss.

Jan, accompanied by one of the men, went down to the canoes and came back with enough food for supper. Because they were familiar with operating the Coleman stove, the hosts did all the cooking: canned stew in quantity, hot cocoa made with dried milk, coffee for the adults.

It was almost normal, because there is a camaraderie among campers of all ages when they meet in the wilderness. They have a basis of friendship, even if they've never seen each other

before and may never meet again. They don't have to say they're interested in the out-of-doors; the fact is evident, because, after all, they are there.

The Algonquin girls had a ball, sitting on pine boughs, eating, singing, listening to the rain. Kim was uneasy; inevitably, names would be exchanged.

Her suspect, Mr. X, introduced himself as Mark Hadley. He suggested that each person should give her own name. Everyone complied willingly, except Robin, who turned her head away.

"Has everyone had enough to eat?" asked Kim brightly.

"What's your name, sprout?" Mark asked Robin.

"How about it, kids, have you all had enough food?" Kim asked again, wishing she had never brought the girls to the shelter but knowing she really had no choice.

"What's your name?" Mark was insistent.

Kim wished she had her accordion so she could drown out that question. The accordion was under a canoe, and by the time she could get it, the damage would be done.

"Her name is Poison Ivy," said Liz.

8 trail encounter

The accommodations certainly didn't resemble the Plaza Hotel, Kim thought, but they weren't too bad. A layer of pine boughs provided a comfortable mattress, a ground cloth kept out the dampness, and a sleeping bag provided warmth. A poncho on top kept out the rain, and an overturned canoe with one end propped up provided good shelter for one's head.

The campers thought it was fun, especially when they got to sleep in their clothes. Under ordinary circumstances, Kim would have thought it was fun, too.

She lay there, Robin on one side, Muffin on the other, lined up like sardines, wishing they were all somewhere else. The weather and their situation seemed to emphasize her vague sense of impending danger, much as she tried to laugh at her dramatic imagination—the imagination that had caused her unnecessary worry many times.

If she only knew exactly what she was afraid of—what to guard against—it wouldn't be quite so bad, but until somebody made a move, she was helpless. Kim listened to the rain pelting down on

the aluminum canoe, trying to ignore the roaring sound of it so she could hear the other night noises.

One thing was sure; come morning, she was going to clue Jan in. It was insane for her to be the only person aware of a potential danger. Whether Mrs. Dixon would approve or not was beside the point; Kim was in charge now, and she had to make whatever decisions were required as she went along.

She would have preferred to tell everyone the score and be done with it. That was out, though. The kids would be intrigued by the excitement, and they'd tend to put Robin on a pedestal from then on, no matter how nasty she was in return.

No. Robin had to earn the respect of the others, if she ever got around to it. Having it handed to her on a silver platter would do her more harm than good. Besides, if Robin found out she might possibly be in jeopardy, there would go the last chance for her to benefit from the summer.

Kim wished that Mrs. Dixon had listened to Mr. Van Alstyne and let him hire a private detective. Right now, it seemed the lesser of two evils. And why hadn't she, Kim Aldrich, listened to him? Why hadn't any of them had the brains to realize he could have hired a *woman* detective? She could have posed as a counselor, and it would have been safer than taking an actual counselor and expecting her to double as a bodyguard.

Decision: She was going to get the campers

away from this island, away from that one particular man, as soon as it was humanly possible—as soon as the rain stopped, if it ever did; as soon as there was enough light to let them paddle away without hitting submerged snags that could punch holes in the canoes.

She fell into an uneasy sleep and dreamed, or heard, a noise that scared the wits out of her. Kim sat bolt upright, and her head seemed to burst.

Whoever had clouted her must have had help from his two companions, because, before Kim's brain cleared, she was trussed up so completely that she couldn't move her arms or legs. She struggled frantically.

"Cut it out," mumbled Robin. "You're digging me with your elbows."

"And you're squashing me," whispered Muffin.

"Sorry," Kim apologized. Her head ached, but it was on straight, at least. She had dreamed someone was trying to get Robin, and she had sat up, banging her head on the canoe's gunwale. As for the restraints, of course she couldn't move her arms and legs freely; she was zipped up in a sleeping bag. It was almost funny—almost.

The rain had stopped, and Kim squirmed her way out to size things up. There was a faint glow of light in the sky. It was time to get going.

She woke Jan and, because there was no time then for a full explanation, said they ought to head out pronto, because that way they'd be the

first arrivals at the next lean-to. They'd be in possession.

That made sense to her and to the campers. At Kim's suggestion, they packed up as quietly as Indians, breaking camp and stowing gear into the canoes.

"What about breakfast?" whispered Angie. "I'm starved."

"We'll eat later," Kim said. "Consider this a help for your diet. Not a sound, now, you kids. We want to get the jump on the men up in that lean-to. They left the canoe slip ahead of us and got the jump on us once, so let's fake them out this time."

They moved silently, enjoying every minute of their stealthy retreat. Once in the canoes, they paddled like Indians, feathering the paddles rather than lifting them on each stroke, to avoid the dipping sound.

Kim smiled grimly to herself. This might well turn out to be the high point of the entire trip for the kids, provided nothing happened to inform them that the danger had been real, not just a lark.

They kept close to the shore, traveling in single file, keeping within the shadows of the trees. Everyone kept a sharp eye out for submerged logs and branches. If one was spotted, the signal was to be a soft whippoorwill whistle, something they had practiced endlessly around camp.

An unpleasant thought crossed Kim's mind. It was Running Deer who had taught them the call, two short notes, a third done with a flick of the tongue against the roof of the mouth. If Running Deer had been enlisted for a kidnapping scheme, he could track them with no trouble at all.

He really was at least half-Indian, and he prided himself on his knowledge of the lore of his ancestors. Until now, Kim had thought he was a consummate actor, because he could so chill his audience; now she wondered if those cold eyes did not require any acting on his part.

The whole idea was so creepy that Kim knew she wasn't really going to try to take possession of the next lean-tos on their route. No, sir, not when that Mark Hadley might be Tom Wilkins-Running Deer. They were both about five feet eleven, deeply tanned, whether by natural pigmentation or by the sun, with jet black hair.

It was time to use some common sense. Kim was going to head for the next ranger station. She'd take the ranger aside and tell him the whole story about Robin Van Alstyne. He'd have to give them protection, wouldn't he? His job was to protect campers, provide help. . . .

If he ordered them back to camp, so be it, Kim thought. The decision would be taken out of her hands, and it would be up to her, as a law-abiding citizen, to obey an officer.

Having made up her mind, Kim was impatient

to get there. She wished she could push a button, like a character in a science fiction story, and have them all zapped out of here, to emerge, reconstituted, in front of the ranger.

Unfortunately they'd have to get there under their own steam, and that meant paddling hard for a couple of hours, portaging over two and a quarter miles to the next lake, and then paddling again. It meant covering two days' worth of distance in one, the original plan having called for some relaxation and fun along the way.

When they reached the portage, the campers balked. They wouldn't budge one inch without food. Jan and Kiki agreed with them.

"What's the mad rush, anyway?" asked Jan. "This trip was supposed to be fun, not an endurance race. What's with you, anyway, Kim? You're acting as nervous as . . . as Mrs. Dixon, so help me."

It was no help, knowing her concern was sticking out all over her, like a rash. "Take it on faith, Jan," Kim said in a low voice. "There is a reason, but I just can't tell you right now."

"Okay, for now," her friend agreed, "but if you don't want to advertise, then rearrange the expression on your face."

There would be no fire for cooking breakfast, Kim announced, forcing herself to sound enthusiastic. They were still Indians, remember? They were being pursued by men who wanted to cap-

ture the campsite that should belong to them. Smoke from a fire would attract attention and give their position away.

That went over all right with the girls, especially when Kim said they could open a tin of meat and have sandwiches. Sandwiches for breakfast were better than cereal, they said.

To Kim, it was a poor substitute for the breakfast she had planned for today. The menu called for pancakes and biscuits baked in the reflector oven. She had looked forward to showing the girls how the oven, which looked like flat aluminum, opened like a triptych, with a back and two hinged sides. Placed beside the fire, open side toward the embers, it made a working oven in which one could bake even a loaf of bread.

Well, a sandwich was better than nothing. Powdered milk, shaken up with water in a canteen, wasn't as good as cocoa, but it, too, was better than nothing.

The breakfast break cost them more than half an hour. Then the wheels were affixed to the canoes, and they were on their way, five canoes in a line, moving along a slippery dirt trail through dense woods.

They had a miserable job boosting one canoe after another over a fallen tree. The tree itself gave Kim a bad moment. It looked as if it had been struck by lightning. She hoped the storm, accompanied by thunder and lightning, wouldn't

change direction and come back at them. It would be no good to be out in canoes in an electrical storm, and the water route was the only way to the ranger station.

The second problem was a real stickler, too. They were on an extremely narrow trail, and someone was coming toward them, carrying his canoe on his shoulders. The girls called out a warning to him, and he let the stern down, so it rested on the ground behind him, then lifted the bow so he could see.

"Can you back up?" the man asked. "There's no way to pass each other here." Then he answered himself. "No, five canoes can't very well back up. I'll go back—not too far—where there's a little clearing with room enough so I can get off the trail."

"I hate to make you—" Kim began.

"No trouble. Just follow me." He turned himself around under his canoe, lifted it with relative ease, and started back the way he had come.

Ordinarily Kim would have taken the meeting at face value, thanked the man, and exchanged a few pleasantries after the canoe maneuver had been accomplished. She also would have asked his advice about shelters, since he had come from the direction in which they were headed.

Today the ordinary seemed suspect. It could be that this man had deliberately come to meet them and was, right now, calmly leading them

straight into some sort of trap.

He didn't lead them to a trap, however, but merely to the clearing. They all took a breather, and he asked where they were from and where they were going, which could have been ordinary, friendly curiosity. Kim was glad she hadn't told a single soul that they were, in reality, aiming for the ranger station, because this man might well run smack into the three men she was trying to escape from. The pursuers could ask a few casual questions, and this man would say, "A gang of girls from a camp? Sure, I saw them. They're just ahead of you. If you hurry, you can catch up with them. They're heading for Raquette Lake."

Kim Aldrich had better stop dreaming up horror stories and get the show on the road, she told herself. "Let's go," she said to the girls, all of whom had collapsed in the clearing.

"Yes, let's go," said Barbie suddenly. "It's too dark and spooky here in the woods. Do they have any bears around here?"

"I've never seen one," said Kim, sticking to the literal truth.

"How about wolves and wildcats?" quavered Angie.

Kim was not about to tell them that there were occasional sightings of wolves, even though she had heard they were scrawny animals that were afraid of people—or that there was a bounty on wildcats and that several were caught each year.

Wildcats, too, tried to avoid humans, except in a direct confrontation.

"These trails are open to the public," she reminded the girls. "Used with a reasonable degree of common sense, they're safe enough. If they weren't, they'd be closed."

"If it's so safe, then why do they have forest rangers?" Angie wanted to know.

People had been known to get hurt in the woods, Kim pointed out, often through their own carelessness. She remembered one man, on Mount Marcy, who attempted to split logs, even though he didn't know how to do it properly. The ranger offered to show him how, but he went ahead and did it on his own—and split his shin instead of the log. The ranger had to send for help and have him carried down the mountain on a litter, alive only because the ranger had administered first aid.

"Among other things, the rangers watch for forest fires," Kim said. "Come on. The canoes are waiting. Let's go."

When they broke out of the woods, it still seemed dark, because the sky was heavily overcast. The canoes were liberated from their slings and wheels and launched. The wind was shifting, an ominous sign, and they had a long way to go.

Once they were out in the water, it was even hard to see the shore, because the lake was huge and because the sky continued to darken. It was

like being on the ocean in a fragile canoe.

"Stick close together. If the fog socks in, we could get separated and—" She cut off that line of thought. "Head for the far side of the lake, dead ahead to the ranger station."

"I thought you said we were going to an island," shouted Liz. "We've already been to a ranger station."

Correction: They would *try* to go to the ranger station. Kim could have kicked herself for not insisting that the strong paddlers work this turn. A couple of the weaker ones were in the sterns of two canoes, and the wind was beginning to blow harder. It was whipping the water up into white-caps. Then suddenly the rains came again, in torrents.

"See that island over there?" yelled Kim, pointing her paddle to starboard. "Head for that. If anyone capsizes, remember, *don't* try to swim for shore. Hang on to the canoe until we come for you. Understand?" She took a deep breath and added, at the top of her lungs, into what was now a full-fledged gale, "If you capsize, forget the gear. Just hang on!"

"Not me," shrieked Barbie. "If we go over, I'll dive for my new sleeping bag."

"No!" yelled Kim, bending to her own task. "Robin, you said you were a strong paddler. Okay, prove it!" She had to get this canoe ashore and then stand by, watch the others in, and go after

anyone whose canoe was in trouble.

The wind kept whipping them broadside; for every foot forward, they seemed to be swept back two. Muffin, on her stomach, tried to help by paddling with her hands.

Somehow they made it to shore. Kim, Robin, and Muffin leaped out. They dragged the gear out after them. Robin said she'd go back to get the others.

"You will not," snapped Kim. "You and Muffin will stay right here. If you move, I'll break every bone in your body, and you'd better believe it. Jan and I will go, if anyone has to go back."

She waded out into the water, waist-deep, to grab the bow of Jan's canoe and pull it in. Two down, three to go.

The third canoe missed the narrow beach and headed for the rocks. Kim fended them off with a paddle and then, with one occupant holding that paddle, pulled them in. Kiki's canoe made it without incident. The last canoe went over, fortunately so close to shore that the occupants were able to stand and, with help, drag their craft in. It was even possible to save the gear, wet though it was.

The canoes were carried up to a safe distance from the water and turned over. Robin was gone, against Kim's orders, but she reappeared to announce that there were two shelters a short way off. Kim could have skinned her alive for disobey-

ing, but she had to admit she was glad to know they could get under cover. She and the others picked up their packs and followed Robin.

There were indeed two log lean-tos, but they faced away from this direction. There was no way to tell whether or not they were occupied—or by whom.

“Wait!” said Kim sharply.

No one paid any attention to her. The girls surged past her and raced for the buildings.

There was nothing for Kim to do but follow, hoping that they weren’t walking straight into a well-prepared trap.

9 into the night

The girls flung their packs into one empty lean-to. Kim stiffened as she heard noises coming from the other shelter.

Filled with dread but steeling herself, she stalked over to investigate. It was better, she figured, to find out who was there than to worry about the unknown.

Robin was there, spreading out her bedroll. She had calmly taken possession of the entire place for herself. Her clothes were already hanging from the wooden pegs along the side walls.

"Finders keepers," she announced defiantly. "You can't come in unless I invite you . . . and I won't," she added.

"Thanks a bunch," remarked Kim dryly, sitting down on the raised floor, feet on the ground. "Now, you listen to me—"

"No," retorted Robin. "I found this place, and it's mine. The rest of them would still be out in the rain if I hadn't discovered the shelters. I did them a favor, and now you can all do me a favor and leave me alone."

Kim tried again. "Don't you realize that you

make your own problems? Why don't you try being nice to people? If you were, they'd be nice to you. Don't you get it?"

"Why should I? They started it. They don't like me, and I don't like them, and that's it. Now, go away!"

"That's enough," said Kim. "There are two shelters and fifteen people. Seven people will share one, and eight will share the other, and that's the final word."

Kim, Jan, Muffin, Barbie, Liz, Angie, and Missy moved in with the inhospitable Robin. Next on the program was trying to dry out their clothes.

Cordwood was stacked neatly under the overhanging roof. Some of it was split, ready for use.

"You're allowed to use all you need of the split logs," Jan informed the girls. "But before you move on, you're duty bound to split an equal amount and leave it for the next people."

Who put the logs there in the first place? the girls wanted to know. That, explained Kim, was yet another of the ranger's responsibilities.

The problem now was how to start a fire in the stone fireplace. The fireplace was outdoors, and it was still raining, though not as hard as a while back. But the drizzle could put out a fire.

First of all, said Kim, they'd have to collect kindling. "See if you can find any little sticks that are even remotely dry. Maybe we can start a fire with— Oh, paper towels! We'll dry the kindling

and then put on the dry logs."

It was a rather half-baked idea. They got a quick blaze going all right, but it went out as soon as the paper burned down.

The counselors put their heads together and decided to improvise. They cut down six sturdy green saplings and lashed three together, at one end, to form a tripod. The other three formed a second tripod. The legs were spread wide and tested for stability, and, presto! they had two supports for a cover.

"I always knew there was a reason for using aluminum canoes instead of canvas," Kiki said, laughing, "besides being lighter than canvas and less subject to damage."

A canoe was boosted up, upside down, and they had a roof for their cookshack. They encircled the fireplace, blew until their faces were red, and finally got the fire going. The bright warmth was welcome, as was the promise of a hot meal later.

A rope originally meant to secure a bedroll was strung from one tripod to the other, and wet jeans and socks were hung up to dry. It was a pretty good setup, but Kim vowed that next time she went to camp, if there were a next time, she'd insist on an addition to the uniform: foul-weather gear.

The waterproof pants and parkas that seamen wear would have been a blessing to every girl on this canoe trip. They were lightweight and took

very little room to pack. Granted, ponchos could double as ground cloths and tent flaps, but the regular foul-weather outfits could be carried in addition to ponchos. They should be considered a must.

The thought was not original, she discovered a few minutes later. A group of boys appeared at the top of the path leading up from the canoe landing. They were dressed in yellow or orange waterproof clothing. When they saw the shelters, situated about two hundred yards apart, they whooped and charged.

"At ease, men," shouted Kevin, halting them in their tracks.

Kim's jaw dropped as he came over and calmly sat down beside her. "Where in the world did you come from?" she asked.

"Well, I'll tell you. We were out on the lake, and the rains came. Thought we'd look around for some cover, and we saw smoke. We came closer, figuring, from the smell of wet jeans, that somebody was cooking up a version of Mrs. Murphy's chowder." He grinned.

There was nothing to do but to move the rest of the girls into Kim's lean-to, despite Robin's objections, and give the other one to the boys. They accepted with alacrity, set up housekeeping, and got busy with camp chores.

To prove their superiority, they split enough logs to last both groups for a week, which didn't

hurt Kim's feelings one bit. She, Jan, and Kiki knew how to slam an ax into the end of a log, lift it, and bang the other end of the log on the ground to effect the split, but none of them had the energy for it right now, and they were unwilling to let the exhausted girls risk a slip of an ax.

The boys carried water up from the lake, another welcome help. Kim sat back contentedly, enjoying being waited on for once. Robin, on the other hand, called the boys a bunch of suckers.

"Okay, get it yourself, then," said one of the Eagles, pouring the water over Robin's head.

Robin grabbed a huge camp pot and vanished down the path before Kim could stop her. Jaw set, she staggered back up, muttered, "Think you're smart!" to the boy, and set the vessel down in front of Kevin. "I'm as good as any boy," she announced.

There was only one way to stop the bickering before everyone got into the act: feed them. The Algonquin and Eagle counselors pooled their resources and came up with a banquet of reconstituted freeze-dried steaks, whipped potatoes, vegetables, biscuits, and gingerbread.

There was only one minor casualty. One of the girls touched the canoe canopy over the fire, let out a yelp when she discovered it was hot, and ran to the lake to soak her hand in icy water. Quick action prevented an annoying blister that would have eliminated her from further paddling

duties, when all hands were needed.

The cooking utensils were washed with hot water and polished with sand, and then the boys scattered. They came back carrying frogs, which they brought close enough to throw into the girls' shelter.

"Yikes, we're being invaded!" yelled Liz, grabbing a paddle to fend off the hopping invaders.

Robin pulled a small snake from her pocket and, holding it by the tail, advanced on the Eagles. They rushed her, took the snake, and put it down the back of her shirt.

Robin went tearing off into the woods, Kevin at her heels. Kim shuddered, remembering how she had once had a snake down her back. She had retaliated by putting a bat in the offender's bed. The bat had zoomed out when the girl pulled down the covers. Kim would never forget that cold, writhing thing against her skin, though.

The battle was joined. The boys were determined to overrun the girls' camp, and the girls were equally determined to stop them.

Kim decided to nip the altercation in the bud; if it built up much further, it would get completely out of hand. She took her lipstick and confronted the threatening horde.

"I'll smear the face of any boy who goes past this line," she said, drawing a mark in the dirt with her toe.

One Eagle tested her, and she proved she could

do it. He pulled back, scrubbing his face with his hand, to the jeers of both Eagles and Algonquins.

"Let me do it," begged Liz. "Can I borrow your lipstick?"

It wasn't necessary. The boys retreated rather than to suffer such an indignity. They stayed in their own territory until Robin and Kevin came back, minus the snake.

"You let it get away," said Robin reproachfully. "Now I'll have to go and find another one."

"You'd better not try it," yelled Barbie. "We're not going to let anybody bring a snake into our lean-to."

"No snakes," said Kim.

"No frogs," said Kevin.

It was really funny, in a way, Kim thought. The boys professed to loathe the girls, but they were going all out to attract their attention, by the only means they knew at their age: tormenting them. And, of course, the girls were fighting back for the same reason.

In a few years, they'd all go into the next phase. One girl would bat her eyes, and a boy would feel ten feet tall when she let him wait on her. Another girl would practice until she could stand up to boys in sports, and she'd be everybody's pal. After a while, it would level off, and they'd know how to get along with each other.

As Muffin had said, they were all silly, but it was normal, and they'd outgrow it. Meanwhile,

even though none of them would admit it, the chance encounter had lent spice to the canoe trips of both camps.

But suppose it were not a chance encounter at all. How come Kevin had so conveniently seen the smoke from their fire? How come he was in that vicinity in the first place?

Kim realized uneasily that she had accepted his appearance at face value. It smacked too much of coincidence, now that she thought about it. Instead of being relieved that Kevin was there, in case those other three men came along, she should have considered another idea.

A strange man caught Robin's runaway horse, and Kevin was right there. A man, who could well have been the same stranger, appeared at the canoe departure point and was there, waiting, when Kim's group reached the first shelter. The girls had moved out early and had, Kim hoped, given them the slip.

But now, from the other direction, came Kevin. It could be a planned maneuver, because now Robin was neatly sandwiched between Kevin and the other men.

It was something to think about. It was also a reason for not telling Kevin about her fears. The best thing to do was to play it cool but keep an eye on him.

Better yet, she should keep her own eye on Robin and have Jan keep Kevin under surveillance

—that is, if she could ever get Jan alone long enough to brief her.

A truce was declared between camps when Kevin broke out some marshmallows and invited everyone to start toasting. Kim brought out her accordion, which proved a handy excuse for not talking to Kevin. She felt too ill at ease with him now to engage in small talk.

She slid into "I've Been Working on the Railroad" to get the songfest going and then on to "Ragtime Cowboy Joe."

One song led to another. They had Old Mother Hubbard going to the cupboard and, finding it bare, throwing it out the window, then Little Miss Muffet sitting on a tuffet and winding up throwing the spider out the window. They saw Nellie Home, said Good Night to Irene, went Sailing, Sailing, and sang the round about Scotland's Burning.

"One more," Kim said at last. "I think, in view of the fact that we're going to sleep lined up like sardines, we may as well give a thought to those nine in the boardinghouse bed.

"Nine men slept in a boardinghouse bed/Roll over, roll over/They all rolled over when anyone said/'Roll over, roll over'/One of them thought it would be a good joke/Not to roll over when anyone spoke/And in the scuffle his neck got broke. . . ."

"That's an object lesson," said Jan. "Now, down

to the beach to brush the teeth."

"Ladies first," Kevin said, "not that I see any wild scramble."

After a few parting insults, the two camps were separated and bedded down in their respective shelters. The rain had petered out. Kevin produced a trumpet and blew taps.

The counselors lingered around the dying embers to enjoy the peace and quiet. For Kim, there was always a magical quality to a night scene in the wilderness, but when Kevin reached for her hand, she gave an involuntary shudder.

Kevin dropped her hand and went to his lean-to, returning with a jacket, which he wrapped around her shoulders. His hand lay against her cheek for a fleeting moment. Wouldn't it be pleasant, Kim thought, if she were positive that he was just what he appeared to be: an attractive man who was fun to be with and who shared her love of the outdoors?

It would be a devastating disillusionment if it turned out that he was merely using her. He could be deliberately throwing her off her guard, making her think of him instead of Robin.

One by one, the rest of the counselors drifted off to their bedrolls, and Kim was left alone with Kevin. She knew she should have ducked out earlier, but somehow she couldn't quite bring herself to leave.

"Nice," murmured Kevin, with a hint of a smile

in his tone. "Someday I'll get married, just so I can go on a canoe trip for my honeymoon."

"How did you and your Eagles happen to come along?" Kim asked, determined to fight the spell of the night.

"I told you. We smelled Mrs. Murphy's chowder— Well, all right, I'll confess," Kevin said. "I knew you were coming on this trip; you told me so yourself. You didn't say, though, where you were starting, so we just put our canoes in and took off. Happened to start at the other end of the chain of lakes, but we found you." He sounded very satisfied with himself.

"But why?"

"Because I like it better when you're in the neighborhood," he answered, grinning. "The kids would skin me alive if they knew I planned to meet up with a bunch of girls, not that they're not enjoying it, too."

"I guess I'd better get some sleep." Kim found it harder, by the minute, to make herself move. She forced herself to stand up. "Good night, Kevin. See you in the morning."

For a second, he didn't move or say a thing. Then, reluctantly, he said, "As the kids say, you dream of me, and I'll dream of you."

It was either a promise or the lowest trick Kim had ever encountered. Dream of him she did, only it was more of a nightmare. She dreamed that he had been hired to kidnap Robin and had no

way out of the commitment and that Kim herself caught him, testified against him, and sent him to prison for life.

She tossed and turned over and then woke up—because she was *able* to turn over. Instead of being wedged in, between Robin and the wall, she had space on one side—because Robin was gone!

Kim crawled out of her sleeping bag and shook herself, hoping she was still dreaming. She wasn't, and that was even worse.

Blind impulse sent her stumbling out to get Kevin, without benefit of flashlight. There was enough moonlight to see by, now that the rain had stopped completely. She whispered his name, but there was no answer.

A noise, like the clank of a paddle against an aluminum canoe, sent her scrambling to the beach. If she had been the fainting type, she would have blacked out, because one canoe was missing. A rut in the sand showed that it had been dragged to the water.

Someone grabbed her from behind and clamped a hand over her mouth so she couldn't scream.

10

with what man?

Reflex action made Kim fight to get free, but it did no good. Whoever had grabbed her was a lot stronger than she.

She forced herself to go limp to throw him off guard, then, with her left hand, grabbed the wrist of the hand that was clamped over her mouth. She pulled downward and, at the same time, used her right hand to push the attacker's elbow up, the way she had learned, in lifesaving, to break a stranglehold.

Now, if she could only exert enough leverage, she could duck under her attacker's elbow, come up behind him, still holding his wrist, and have him in a hammerlock. There was just one thing wrong with the idea: He was not a drowning person, who, if taken underwater, would relax his grip to reach for the surface. Instead, he tightened his own grip.

"Easy, easy," said a voice in her ear. "It's Kevin, for Pete's sake. I just didn't want you to yell and wake the whole camp."

He let her go, and she spun around to face him. "What are you doing here?" she whispered.

"I heard a noise and came to investigate," he answered.

A canoe was missing. Robin was gone. Time was important, and there was no point in reviewing past events. Kim had to take Kevin on faith, because she couldn't handle things alone. All she could do was to push her doubts into the back of her mind and slam the door on them.

"Which one of your kids is missing?" Kevin asked. "Mine are all there; I checked."

"Robin Van Alstyne," she said, trying to keep her voice calm. "Look, I guess I'd better level with you."

She launched into a brief explanation of the kidnapping threat that had hung over Robin, of the money involved. Kevin cut her short.

"Never mind all that," he said sharply. "The point is, she's gone. Now, we know she's a real stinker, and she might perfectly well just take a canoe and circle around the island, out of sight, to get a rise out of all of us. Okay, let's go look."

He'd had the foresight to bring a paddle. Silently they lifted a canoe and carried it to the water's edge. Kim climbed into the bow. Kevin pushed off and began paddling quietly.

It was eerie to be out in a ground-level mist, with only moonlight to guide them. Kim strained her eyes, trying to catch any sign of movement.

"Hey, over there," she whispered. "Under that overhanging tree. In the shadows."

The chilling part of it was that there was no sign of life in the motionless canoe ahead. It turned out to be a half-submerged log, causing them momentary relief and then worse fear. They moved on until they had completely circled the island, then pulled into the landing.

"What are we going to do?" asked Kim, thoroughly horrified by now. If Robin had headed out into the lake, she could drown. "If I ever get my hands on her, I'll . . . I'll . . ."

She was assuming, of course, that Robin had deliberately done a vanishing act, Kevin reminded her. It could be worse; she could have been removed from the island against her will.

"That would mean that someone else had to be here, and he'd have to come by boat," Kim pointed out. "Then why would a canoe be missing?"

"To throw us off the track," Kevin answered. "We'll have to tell the others, and then we'll have to head for the ranger station and get a search mounted. It's time to quit fooling around. Come on."

Kim's heart was way down in her soggy moccasins. How could anyone find one little girl in this vast wilderness? Even if helicopters flew over the area, Robin could be obscured by trees. Search parties on foot could scour miles of territory and never find a trail, if a determined kidnapper deliberately covered up every sign.

And, worst of all, Robin might be underwater

by now, already dead. The canoe could have filled with water and sunk.

Stop being negative and wasting time, she told herself. "Wait," she said, grabbing Kevin's hand. "If we wake the entire camp, we'll have a major disaster on our hands. Every one of the kids will want to be a hero and go flying off to search."

"Right. They'd case the island, and then they'd pile into the canoes, and we'd have a dozen lost kids instead of one," Kevin agreed.

They decided to wake one counselor from Algonquin and one from Eagle Rock. It was a fairly easy job to accomplish, because the kids all slept like logs.

"Come on down to the landing," Kim whispered to Jan.

"Huh? What's up?" mumbled her friend.

"Just come. Quietly. Bring a paddle," Kim whispered. "Flashlight, too. Hurry."

She scurried back to the beach, tripped over a root, and landed facedown on the sand. Kevin and Tom Morrison, another Eagle counselor, picked her up and dusted her off.

"What's going on?" asked Jan, appearing out of nowhere. She had a flashlight, a paddle, and an unsheathed hunting knife. She was obviously shocked when Kim explained the emergency.

"Here's what we'll do," Kevin put in. "You, Jan, and Tom will have to tell your kids a little white lie. Tell them Robin's sick, and if you ask me, that

kid is sick—in the head. Tell them we have to take her to a ranger station and call for a helicopter to take her to the hospital. Kim and I really are going to the ranger station for help.

"We'll take one of the Eagle canoes," he went on, "because you girls are already missing one." He snapped his fingers. "The kids will spot the flaw in the story; two missing canoes when it would really only take one to get Robin—"

"Don't waste time on that," Jan broke in sharply. "We'll just have to let them think someone was careless and didn't pull the canoe far enough out of the water, and the tide—"

"There isn't any tide in a lake," Kim reminded her.

"Okay, the storm whipped up waves," Kevin suggested impatiently. That was true enough.

"You'll have to take charge of the Eagles, Tom, and you'll have to help Jan with the Algonquins. What I want you to do is stick together. Go back to where we launched, Tom."

The Eagles wouldn't like that, Tom pointed out. They'd want to complete their trip.

"They have to learn the difference between want and need," Kevin said shortly. "Take them back; take the girls with you. Our big truck, with canoe racks, is parked there. Load all the canoes in it, and then drive the girls' canoes back to where they got them."

Kim was frantic to get going, but she had to ad-

mit, in her heart, that Kevin was right to make arrangements for the other campers. He was in charge of his group, and she was in charge of the Algonquins. They couldn't just take off without providing for both groups. Plans were a must.

"You'll have to pay for the missing canoe," she told Jan. "Here. Camp credit card." She fished the card from her billfold stashed in the back pocket of her jeans. "Oh, the keys to the bus." She handed them over, too. "And, whatever you do, don't forget to give Liz and Barbie their medications at the right times."

"Tom, you drive the truck back to camp, and Jan, you follow him in your minibus. Stick together from here on in," Kevin said. "Any questions? Okay, then, carry on, you guys. Take care. Let's go, Kim."

The idea of leaving the rest of the girls scared Kim. Suppose something happened to one of them. Jan reminded her that the camp had survived for years without her.

That was true, she had to admit, but the idea was still unsettling. "Wouldn't it be better if both camps stayed here for one day?" she asked. "Suppose Robin came back."

She wasn't going to come back, Kevin said flatly.

He no sooner had the words out than it seemed as if he had been proved wrong. A small figure appeared at the end of the trail leading from the shelters to the beach.

Kim pounced without a moment's hesitation, throwing the girl to the ground and sitting on her so she couldn't escape again.

"Hey!" It was Muffin. "What're you doing?"

End of relief. "What are *you* doing?" demanded Kim, helping her up.

"Nothing," the girl protested. "I heard something, and I thought maybe Robin was planning to run away again. Maybe with that man."

"*What man?*" Kim's voice shot up an octave.

"You know. The man in the canoe. The one who kept following us. Didn't you see him?"

"What did he look like?" Kim kept her voice calm, through an effort of will.

"I don't know. Just a man. Like one of those guys who let us use their stove. Or maybe like the man we met on the portage," said Muffin.

"When did you last see him?" asked Kim.

"I don't know. When it got dark, I guess. He passed the island in his canoe."

Why hadn't she told anyone?

Muffin thought everyone had seen him. Besides, Kim had said that all campers are friends, even though they meet for the first time on a trail or a canoe trip. "Is he an enemy?" Muffin's voice sank to a whisper. "Did he kidnap Robin?"

"Don't be silly," snapped Kevin. "Robin's sick. We're taking her ashore. Jan will explain. Let's go, Kim."

"That settles it," he added as they leaped into

their canoe and shoved off. "We're heading for a ranger station. There's something fishy—"

"I should have told you before about Robin," Kim said in a small voice. "I only came to camp to take care of her. She's—"

"Van Alstyne. Money," Kevin broke in. "But keep your voice down. Sounds carry on the water. We'll head for the station at the far end of the lake."

There was another ranger station that was actually closer, but it would mean either an arduous portage or shooting a dangerous series of rapids, impossible except in times of high water and tricky even then. They couldn't risk their own necks at this point, or there would be nobody to get help for Robin.

"Do you know how to find the station on the lake?" asked Kim.

Kevin had a map. He shipped his paddle, opened the chart, and spread it out on the bottom of the canoe. On his knees, with his flashlight shielded, he studied it, compared it with his compass, and got his bearings.

"Looks like about three miles as the crow flies," he said. "I don't think we'd better try it that way, though. We might miss it, because it's between two points of land. Besides, if Robin did simply run off and she's headed for shore under her own power, she just might. . . ."

She just might have headed for the nearest

point of land. Kim filled in the end of the sentence for herself. Problem: There was no way to know which way she had headed when she took off; she could just as easily have headed for the opposite shore.

There was an even stronger possibility that she hadn't left under her own power at all. The prospects of finding her were dismal, and Kim found herself aching for a little girl, however unpleasant the little girl, who either had been seized and whisked away or was now alone in this vast wilderness.

What made it even more sickening was the fact that Robin had never been to camp before. Muffin, for instance, was reasonably well versed in survival techniques, because she had come to camp ever since she was six. Robin was a greenhorn. She had no equipment with her and wouldn't know how to use it if she did have.

Kim kept paddling as hard as she could, until her arms felt as if they would fall off at the shoulders. After a while, she gave up asking Kevin if he minded if she changed sides and began shifting every few minutes, trying to ease the strain.

Poor Mrs. Dixon, she thought. She'd have a conniption. The camp would face ruin. All her years of effort would be gone if they couldn't find Robin.

But, darn it, anyway, why had Mrs. Dixon gone out on a limb like this and dragged Kim with her?

She felt like wringing Mrs. Dixon's neck, but she couldn't excuse herself and put all the blame on someone else.

She should have said a flat no. Only she had let herself believe that there wasn't any real danger, just a vague possibility of trouble that could be averted with a little caution.

It's really my fault, she told herself, and I can't even claim credit for trying to brief Robin about what to do in the event of an emergency. At least Mrs. Dixon had, to some extent; she had told Robin, again and again, to head for a forest ranger station if she were ever in trouble. As a matter of fact, Kim dimly remembered Mrs. Dixon telling Robin the locations of the stations along the route of this ill-fated canoe trip.

And maybe that's what put the idea in Robin's head. It would sound easy: just escape, go to a ranger station, say she was lost, and get herself sent home. Oh, Robin could dream up some reason for her being there in the forest alone. She might even say she had been with her family and had been separated from them. She wouldn't even mention Camp Algonquin, so if she were found, no message would be sent to Mrs. Dixon.

A loud scraping noise snapped Kim out of her merry-go-round thoughts. They had run over a submerged rock.

"We're shipping water," said Kevin.

That's all they needed—a hole in the canoe.

And they were still a good half mile from shore.

"Paddle," ordered Kevin. "Harder."

She strained at the task, but instead of surging ahead, the canoe grew sluggish. The water was up around Kim's feet.

"Bail," Kevin ordered tersely.

With what? she thought wildly. They had no bucket aboard. No anything.

She took off her moccasins and began working, but the water gained on her. Kevin kept paddling.

"Here, take my jacket," he said after a couple of minutes. He skinned out of it and passed it to her. "It's waterproof. See if you can rig it like a sea anchor, a sort of pail."

If that didn't work, Kim knew, they'd have to let the canoe sink and swim for shore. That would leave them with no transportation but their feet, to get them, by land, through dense woods to the ranger station.

Suppose Robin had hit a rock. She wouldn't have anyone to bail for her. She wouldn't have the stamina to swim that distance in the icy water. . . .

Kevin gave up his paddling and came to her assistance. He held one end of the jacket, and she held the other. Together they managed to scoop out enough water to locate the leak. Kevin rolled up one of his socks, stuffed it into the hole, and wadded the jacket on top.

"Sit on it," he ordered. "No; better yet, kneel on it and keep bailing with your moccasin."

It wasn't an ideal solution, but it worked, after a fashion. Riding low in the water, they made it to shore and dragged the canoe up onto a rocky spit of land. Heaving and pushing, they turned it over and dumped out gallons of unwanted ballast.

"Now what do we do, send up a flare?" asked Kim. She wanted to kick herself. They had flares in the Algonquin canoes, but she hadn't thought to bring any.

There were flares in this Eagle Rock canoe, too, but nobody had thought to keep them out of the water, Kevin told her angrily.

"Don't blame me!" she snapped.

"I wasn't blaming you!" he snapped back. "I was blaming myself. Sorry," he added. "We're both tired and worried, but there's no point in chewing each other's head off."

At his suggestion, they looked for a trail through the woods. There was none, and the underbrush was so dense that they would have had to hack their way through with a machete, which, of course, they lacked.

A canvas canoe could be repaired, Kim thought gloomily. You spread on glue, put a canvas patch on, and, when it's dry, coat it with waterproof varnish. That took hours, but there was a quicker way, for emergencies; a patch could be made of rubber, like a tire patch.

A hole in an aluminum canoe, on the other hand, was a hole. Permanent.

the pale ranger

Kim sank down on a big rock, tears of frustration in her eyes. She was no longer furious at Robin but just scared to death for her safety. Their chances of finding her had been slim from the beginning, but it seemed the final irony that their faint hope was now cut off by a hole in a canoe.

Now that their frantic paddling and bailing were over, the cold mist seemed to penetrate right to her bones. Her feet were soaked; she wanted to blow her nose and didn't have a handkerchief. Kim Aldrich was thoroughly miserable.

"Don't just sit there. Come on and hold the light," Kevin said irritably.

They already knew what the canoe looked like, so why bother? She went, nonetheless, and took the flashlight he handed to her.

He unstrapped a smallish pack that hung from his belt. In all the commotion, Kim had not noticed it before.

"Shine the light down here on the ground," he directed. "I have to set up shop."

"What are you going to do?"

"Patch the canoe," he said. "What else?"

Chalk one up for Kevin Clark. As far as Kim had ever known, the only way to repair an aluminum canoe was to send it to a shop to be welded, and it was often cheaper to buy a new canoe. Yet here was Kevin, laying out tin shears, rivets, hammer, one of the new stick-to-everything glues, and pieces of aluminum.

He measured the size of the hole in the canoe, cut a patch sufficiently larger, and dried the battered section of the canoe as best he could. He spread glue on the canoe and on one side of the patch, put the patch on, held it for about half a minute, and then pulled it off. Then he put the patch back in place. The contact glue should now adhere.

"Okay, you hold it there and shine the light on it," Kevin said in a low voice. "Unfortunately, this is going to make a heck of a racket, but it just can't be helped."

He was right on that score. As he hammered in rivets around the edge of the patch, the noise echoed and reechoed. Anyone within a couple of miles would have had to be deaf to fail to hear it.

The job took about twenty minutes—time that could be the difference between life and death for Robin—twenty minutes of announcing, loud and clear, that the kidnapper, if there was a kidnapper, had better get going.

The silence when the hammering stopped was almost worse. That would surely signal that they

were on the move, searching again.

"Okay, give me a hand," Kevin said. "Let's put it in the water and test it."

They turned it right side up, carried it to the water, and shone the light inside. The patch seemed to hold.

"Get in and see if it still holds," Kevin directed. "Still okay? Now we'll try it with my weight added."

The patch continued to hold, and Kim was frantic to get going to the ranger's station. Instead, Kevin got back out and methodically packed up his tools. He was right, of course; they might have to put on another patch, and, even more important, there was no sense in leaving evidence behind. But it all took time, agonizing time.

"No more talking," Kevin said as he climbed back in and took his place in the stern. "Not unless you see a snag. We'll hug the shore whenever we can. At this point, we have to assume, for the sake of safety, that there is a kidnapper somewhere around. He wouldn't want to see us reach the ranger station."

Kim had deliberately refused to recognize the danger to themselves. It had been enough to worry about Robin, but now she could hear, in her imagination, the zing of a rifle bullet and the weird *whup, whup, whup* of the ricochet on the water. She could hear Kevin grunt as he crumpled. Or was it herself she could see falling to the

bottom of the canoe or into the icy water?

She paddled, trying to keep her eyes down, so that she'd see any obstacles in the water, but she couldn't help glancing toward shore. They were passing a rocky outcropping topped by dense forest. Beyond that, as the ground rose up to a mountain, the trees were equally thick. Someone could easily be there, above them, watching every inch of their progress. A hundred people could have been there watching, waiting for the perfect shot.

They could be in the sights of a couple of rifles right this minute. Kim strained her eyes looking for the flicker of a flashlight and knew that was stupid; it was now light enough that someone could move through even dense woods using the natural light.

There was someone up there! Kim pointed, as inconspicuously as possible, to where she thought she had seen something move. Her heart began banging against her ribs so hard that she could hear it. She glanced back at Kevin to get his reaction. She whispered to him. If it were Robin, they should beach the canoe somewhere and go after her. They should shout.

Kevin shook his head and put his finger to his lips. Kim nodded. They couldn't risk it. First things had to come first; they had to go to—*try* to go to—the ranger for help.

It was nightmarish, feeling that someone was watching, waiting to choose his time to end their

wild-geese chase. Any second now. . . .

Nonsense, Kim told herself firmly. A shot would echo and bring the ranger. The man would be turning himself in—unless he had a silencer, of course, and unless he had already prepared his story, which would be easy if he knew the wilderness. Just tell the ranger he had seen a wolf, had just missed him, darn it; the seventy-five-dollar bounty had gotten away. And by the time the bodies, hers and Kevin's, were discovered, the man would be long gone.

Kim fought the impulse to paddle like a manic, just to get away from there. She forced herself instead to feather the paddle, keep it in the water and snake it forward after each stroke, rather than lift it out. Such Indian paddling was silent, and silence was perhaps their only ally.

They rounded a point of land, and the ranger station was there, in sight. It was doubly hard to keep from paddling frantically, without thought of the noise.

A sixth sense, or perhaps remembered fear, gave her the feeling that they were not yet safe, even when they reached the landing near the station. There was something wrong, something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

The flagpole! That was it. The ranger hadn't raised the flag.

The flag on every government installation should be raised by eight o'clock. Kim glanced at

her watch. It was no help; it had stopped at two fifteen.

"It's only seven," said Kevin, no longer whispering. He grabbed her by the hand the instant they were out of the canoe and ran to the long single-story building.

They could hear a muffled voice as they reached the door. Good, thought Kim, the ranger was up and about. But maybe it was not good. Maybe a kidnapper was there, giving some phony reason for his being in the vicinity.

Instead of knocking, Kim and Kevin went around the side of the building and looked in a window. Apparently nobody was in the front room.

The voice came from a headset lying on a table in front of a shortwave radio. Okay, then, the ranger was probably shaving and had turned up the volume so that he could catch any important message.

They knocked on the door but nobody came, so they went in, uninvited. "Barometer rising. Out," said the radio voice. Without thinking, Kim switched the control from "receive" to "off."

"Anybody home?" called Kevin.

The door to the inner room was closed. They knocked, then opened it. Still no sign of the ranger.

Kim was sure it was because of them that he was gone. Of course. He had heard them putting rivets in the canoe and had gone to see if they

needed help. It was his *job* to look out for campers. If they had stayed there, where they had done the patch job, he'd have come to them. It could be an hour or more before he got back.

"We can't wait that long," Kevin said, flinging himself down in the chair facing the radio. He put on the headset, flipped the switch to "send," and grabbed the microphone. "Come in, please. Over," he began.

"Hold it!" ordered a voice from the door.

Kim almost jumped out of her skin. She whirled around and found herself face-to-face with an irate forest ranger. Even though his features were shadowed by his broad-brimmed uniform hat, there was no doubt about his mood. His hand was on his holster.

He strode past her, took the microphone from Kevin, and said, in clipped tones, "Sorry, sir, no messages. I just stepped outside, and I came back to find a dude playing around with the set. Out!"

Kevin took off the headset, placed it on the table, and leaped to his feet. "Sorry, but—"

"That equipment is for the exclusive use of Forest Service personnel." The ranger's tone was icy.

"Sorry," said Kevin again. "We tried to find you. We have an emergency."

"What? Where?" The ranger sat down, rummaged in a drawer of the table, and came up with

a pad and pencil. He tilted his hat forward as he swung around to face them.

"Missing child," said Kevin.

"Name?"

"Robin Van Alstyne," said Kim.

"You her parents?"

"No, no, no!" Kim blurted out. "Look, I'm a counselor at Camp Algonquin. This is Kevin Clark; he's a counselor at Eagle Rock Camp. We were on a canoe trip through the chain of lakes."

"Together?"

Kim felt like throttling him. She knew he had to get the facts, knew it because her father was an FBI agent, and he, too, had to get his facts straight before he could investigate a case. But in the meantime, they were wasting precious time.

"No," Kim said. "We started from one direction, near Old Forge. Eagle Rock started from the other direction. We met last night, on an island in Raquette Lake."

"Met by prearrangement?"

"No."

"You sure about that?" the ranger persisted.

"Look, the kid's missing," put in Kevin. "That's what counts. We have to get a search organized—but right away."

"You came here for help, right? Then let me provide it in my own way," said the ranger. "Now, when was she last seen?"

"About nine o'clock last night. She was asleep

in our shelter," said Kim. "No, it was later than that. She was still there when I went to bed. She was gone when I woke up."

"That was about one o'clock," Kevin said, without waiting for the question. "I heard a noise at the canoe landing and went down to investigate. Miss Aldrich, here, came along right behind me. One canoe was missing."

"Could have washed out in the storm," said the ranger. "Did you search the island?"

"Yes," said Kevin, through clenched teeth. "The canoe did *not* wash out. It was dragged. The tracks were there in the sand."

"Has she ever done this sort of thing before—run away?"

"Yes, unfortunately," Kim admitted. "She's not what you'd call a cooperative child. But that's not the point; the point is that she's missing, and we have to find her, but we're wasting time."

"We can't start a search without the facts," the ranger pointed out. "Now, do you know which direction she headed?"

No, they told him. They had held a faint hope that, if she ran away, she would head for the ranger's station. They had even hoped she might be there when they arrived.

"That's assuming that she ran away and wasn't taken. . . ." Kim's voice trailed off.

Was there any reason to suspect foul play? the ranger asked.

No specific reason, Kim told him. It would be quite characteristic for Robin to leave under her own power, for whatever reasons she had in her crazy, mixed-up head. But there had been kidnapping threats in the past. The girl's own father had been afraid something might happen to her. The only reason Kim was at camp was to keep a close watch over her.

"Didn't do a very good job, did you?" he said.

That was a low blow, and Kim winced. "Fixing the blame isn't the point," she snapped. "Finding that girl is the objective."

"You realize, of course, that she *could* have cap-sized and drowned. Is she an expert paddler?"

"Yes, we realize, and, no, she is not. But we have to try to find her—please!" begged Kim.

Of course, he agreed. That was part of his job, finding lost campers. "Can you give me a description of her?"

"Twelve years old, blond ponytail, blue eyes, about five feet tall or a shade under, thin," said Kim.

"What was she wearing?"

"Jeans, navy sweat shirt, blue sneakers," Kim told him. "At least, I guess that's what she had on. She went to bed in her jeans and sweat shirt."

"I don't suppose you have a picture of her."

"No."

He quizzed them again about the kidnapping threats. Any recent ones? No? Good. Why did

they think this might be a kidnapping, especially with a girl who made a practice of running away? Was there one shred of evidence?

"No, not a shred," Kim said, "unless you want to count the sick feeling in my bones and two men who seemed to take too much interest in her." She told him about the man who had caught the runaway horse and about the other man, the one they had met on the canoe trip—and that they might even be the same man.

It sounded mixed-up, garbled, and improbable, even to Kim's own ears. She couldn't blame the ranger for sighing and putting down his pencil.

"We'll get a search going," he said. "We'll use helicopters, light planes, and parties of searchers on foot. We'll do the best we can."

At last, thought Kim. If his fact-finding session had lasted any longer, she would have blown a fuse, and that would have taken even more time. She had no right to criticize him, either; he was trained for this sort of work. He knew, better than she, how to conduct an all-out search and rescue mission.

Oh, please, God, she prayed silently, *make that rescue part come true.* "We have to notify the camp director, too," she said, her voice low. "After you call in about Robin, can you have someone relay a call to Mrs. Dixon at Camp Algonquin? The number is NA three two six nine zero, but you have to dial one first. We have to let her

know that this has happened."

"Right," said the ranger, swinging around to face the shortwave set. He took off his hat, placed it on the table, and put on the headset. He reached for the control switch and began sending.

"Ranger Station Six calling headquarters. Come in, please. Over."

"Missing person report," he said into the mike. "Girl, twelve years old, blond, ponytail, blue eyes, around five feet tall, wearing jeans, blue sweat shirt, blue sneakers." He paused for a fraction of a second, then continued coolly, "Last seen in the vicinity of Pine Island on Raquette Lake about one A.M. today. May have left in canoe. History of running away. . . ."

Kim stared at the back of the ranger's neck, then at his arms, and then at his neck again. She could feel the hair on the back of her own neck stand up.

Who ever heard of a forest ranger without a trace of a tan?

12

a blue sneaker

Kim kept staring at the back of the man's neck, trying to think what to do. If she accused him—but of what? Of not having a proper tan? That was silly.

Besides, a ranger could have been out sick. He could have lost his tan in a hospital. Elementary deduction. And he had done exactly as they had asked; he had called in a description of Robin, in the flat tones of a man accustomed to his job.

"We'll have to mount a full-scale search and rescue mission. Helicopters from the Air Force base at Plattsburgh. Volunteers on foot," the man said into the microphone.

"Set up road barriers on the highways. Stop every car, the way we do in case of a forest fire.

"I have two people here. Man and girl. The three of us will start a search from here. Over." The ranger scribbled something on his pad.

Kim continued to stare at his back. She saw the man shift slightly in his chair, saw his foot move surreptitiously. She had to bite her tongue to keep from letting out a scream at what she saw.

What the man pushed under the table, so it

would be out of sight, was a small blue sneaker—a Robin-sized sneaker. Kim was barely able to restrain herself from diving for it.

There was no doubt in her mind now that the ranger was a phony. He could very well be the person who had kidnapped Robin. How he had done it, Kim had not the faintest idea, but she couldn't confront him, because he was armed.

She was frantic to get Kevin outside, out of ear-shot, to tell him what she had seen and what she now suspected. Her mind ran around in circles, trying to figure out how to do it.

The man had no intention of letting them out of his sight. He had already told headquarters that she and Kevin would go out into the woods to help him search.

Wait a second, she told herself. This didn't make sense. The man *had* radioed for help, hadn't he? Why would he do that if he were a kidnapper?

Answer: He had faked the call. He hadn't thrown the switch to send or receive.

"Right," said the man, into the mike. "I'll check back with you in one hour. Out." He took off the headset, put it down on the table, replaced his hat, and again tilted it forward to shadow his face. Now he faced them and stood up. "All right, let's go."

The last thing in the world that Kim Aldrich planned to do was to go with him. The problem was how to get away without broadcasting the

fact that she was sure he was a criminal.

"Wait a minute," she urged. "Excuse me, but we really have to report this to Mrs. Dixon, the camp director." She was talking too fast, and she was sure the man could hear her heart pounding. "Robin's parents are in Europe, and she'll have to notify them."

Okay, so I sound scared out of my wits, she told herself. What of it? Even if this were a real ranger, I'd be upset about the disappearance of a camper. I'd be horrified about having to send the message to Mrs. Dixon. I am horrified.

"Wouldn't it be better to hold off awhile, to see if we can find the girl? Then you'll be more or less in the clear before anybody has to know," he suggested, eyeing them sharply.

"That's tempting," said Kevin, "but finding her is a mighty long shot. Better call. If you don't mind," he added politely.

The man sat down again and went through the whole routine. Take off hat, put it on table, put on headset, reach for switch. . . .

All Kim accomplished was a delaying action. When he finished with the radio, the man again motioned them to the door. This time, his hand was on his weapon.

Why didn't he just shoot them and be done with it? she wondered wildly. What was his point in playing this stupid game?

Answer: His objective was to hold Robin for

ransom, collect the money, and escape. He didn't want to leave a lot of bodies around.

Yes, but what about the real ranger? He must have been disposed of somehow, Kim thought. Having murdered one man—if he had—why would he hesitate to knock off a couple of other people?

One body would be easier to hide than three, she answered herself. Besides, the shot might be heard by bona fide campers along the chain of lakes.

She had run out of stalling tactics. Kim went toward the door; her feet felt like lead. *Do something, Kevin*, she pleaded silently. But Kevin apparently was not at all suspicious of the man. He walked unhesitatingly to the door.

Once outside, the man picked up a rifle he must have left on the porch. That was worse than the pistol, Kim knew; the range was longer.

Maybe he planned to lose them in the woods, go and get Robin, wherever he had hidden her—dead or alive—and just go away. Then again, maybe not. Maybe he planned to pick them off, one at a time, from behind, when they'd have no chance to jump him.

Kevin, surprisingly, held out his hand to the man. "I can't thank you enough for taking over. It's good to know the professionals are in charge of the search. We'll be getting on back to our campers, but we'll check in later, at one of the other

stations, to see if you've had any luck."

"Now, hold on a minute," snapped the man. "You asked for help, but you can certainly join the search. That's the least you can do."

"I sure wish we could," said Kevin, "but we left a whole mob of kids on that island. We told them we'd be back by eight o'clock, and it's almost that now. You know how kids are. If we don't show, they'll grab the excuse to come looking for us."

Brilliant! Kim applauded silently. "He's right," she said. "They'd come looking for us, and we'd have a hundred kids swarming all over the woods." That was a gross exaggeration but worth a try. "There'd be kids everywhere, and we'd wind up with at least a dozen lost, instead of just one."

Kim held her breath while he thought things over. This was a moment of truth; he'd either drop the pretense and shoot them or let them go. But as far as he knew, that would still leave him with a hundred kids to deal with.

"We can't have that, of course," the man said at last. "All right. Go back to the island and round them up, but get them out of here, out of the vicinity. Take them back toward Old Forge, understand? We don't want a bunch of kids confusing things while we run the search."

Kim remembered to breathe again, but she had to force herself to resist a loud sigh of relief. Kevin thanked the man again, took her arm, and led her to the canoe.

"Don't look back," he said under his breath.

The skin on her back crawled. Any second now, a bullet could hit her, before she had a chance to hit the dirt or even try to duck. She climbed into the canoe and, with numb hands, picked up her paddle. The boat lurched as Kevin took his place in the stern.

There was no point in paddling silently. The objective was to get going as quickly as possible, acting as if they had nothing on their minds except retracing their route.

Fifteen minutes later, they were out of sight, hidden by the rock promontory. Kim swung around to face Kevin and compare notes.

"When did you know about him?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"His broadcast was a phony," he answered. "He held his hand over the switch, but he didn't throw it. I wasn't sure at first, but the second time he broadcast, I was watching closely."

Kim told him about the sneaker. "What do we do now?" she asked.

"We'll have to go back," Kevin said. "No, on second thought, I'll put you ashore here, and I'll go back. I'll look around and see if there's any trace of Robin. He may have her hidden right near the station."

A shudder ran down Kim's spine. She had a ghastly mental picture of the girl from Florida who had been kidnapped and buried alive for

days. It was a miracle that she survived. Even though she had some air to breathe, she could have died of pure fright. If Robin were buried, they may have walked right past her grave.

Kevin swung the canoe to shore. "Come on, scramble out," he said. "Lie low under the trees. I'll give the whippoorwill call when I get back."

If he got back, thought Kim. "I'm going with you," she announced.

"Not on your life," he said.

"Look at the other side of the coin," she said, setting her jaw stubbornly. "He'd rather have us separate, if. . . ."

He didn't like the idea one bit, but he finally agreed that Kim might be safer with him than alone. "Okay, but we're not going to look for Robin, then. Not at first, anyway. Our objective is going to be one thing; to get to that radio and send a real message—get a real search going."

A search for a little girl and for a maniac. Kim shivered again.

They started back, cautiously and silently. It seemed to Kim that they were deliberately going to their own doom, but they had no choice. They couldn't just go away, rejoin their campers, and wait, perhaps a full day, until they reached another ranger station. By then, it would be too late to save Robin. She'd be gone. Or dead.

Kim saw something move among the trees, and her heart seemed to stop cold. A silent form

moved into sight. A deer went to the water to drink and then slipped away.

Something splashed into the water. A bullet? Kim flinched and froze. She would rather have flung herself to the bottom of the boat or over the side, but that might have increased their danger.

It was only a frog.

They got as close to the ranger station, by water, as they could without exposing themselves. Rather than risk the sound of a canoe scraping on sand, they took off their moccasins, stepped into the water, and lifted the craft ashore. They hid it in the thick bushes and lay facedown beside it, straining their ears to find out if anyone were stalking around the vicinity.

Kim was hideously aware of pine needles. Over the years, or centuries, they had built to a depth of a foot or two. They provided a springy mattress if you had a poncho under you; without it, they stabbed. It would be so easy to rake them back and bury a body under them. Much easier than digging a hole in dirt. Much harder to detect.

She found herself feeling around for any large, unexplained mound, hoping she wouldn't find one.

A mosquito buzzed around her face, and she tried to shoo it away. It dove, landed on her neck, and jabbed. Instinctively she raised her hand to slap it dead. Kevin caught her by the wrist, just in time to prevent her giving away their position.

Cautiously he raised his head to check on the

ranger. He dropped back down, fingers digging into Kim's shoulder to keep her quiet. Then he looked again.

"He's just leaving," Kevin whispered against Kim's ear. "He has the rifle. He's heading uphill."

Why had he waited so long to get going? Kim wondered. She answered herself: He suspected that they'd come back, or he had things to do, like sneakers or bodies to hide.

"We'll give him five minutes to get far enough away," Kevin whispered, checking his watch.

Those were the longest five minutes of Kim's life. They dragged more like five hours. Yet when they were past, she almost wished they weren't. She didn't want to leave the comparative safety of the bushes.

"Let's go," said Kevin. "Keep down low, move slowly, and keep away from open ground whenever you can."

It was like going to the guillotine, Kim thought, or the firing squad.

They reached the cabin without being challenged. So far, so good. Kevin motioned for Kim to crouch down around the corner of the porch while he opened the door; then she could dart in.

The door was locked. There was a note on it saying, "On patrol. Back later."

Every window was locked; they tried them all. They stared at each other in dismay. If they threw a rock through the glass, it would sound like a

shot echoing sharply around the lake.

Thinking of the lake made Kim have a horrible thought. The phony ranger had headed uphill. Wasn't it perfectly possible that he was armed with binoculars, as well as a rifle? He could be heading for high ground to look toward the island and check whether or not the campers were leaving. Inevitably, he'd look back to the ranger station, too.

Kevin was busy. He took his canoe patching kit from his belt, extracted a screwdriver, and pried a strip of molding from the back door of the cabin. He put the screwdriver away, took out his wallet, and fished out a stiff plastic credit card. He slid the card into the narrow space between the door and the casing, ran it down to the lock, and popped the lock open.

"Easy, when you know how," he said. "I locked myself out one day and had to call a locksmith. He showed me the trick. Makes you realize how burglars get in without difficulty."

They went in, shut the door behind them, and went to the radio. Kevin put on the headset, threw the switch to send, and then realized the microphone was gone.

Kim groaned in frustration. Somehow, if the radio had been smashed, it wouldn't be quite so infuriating. But to be unable to send for help because just one little piece of equipment had been removed seemed just too much.

"Clever," muttered Kevin. "If anybody looked in the window, it would look okay. Maybe he hid it somewhere."

They searched every cupboard, every dresser drawer, the closets. "It's probably at the bottom of the lake," Kim said. "He wouldn't have any reason to keep it."

"Better look around outside, anyway," Kevin said.

She knew he did not mean to look for any microphone outdoors. He was thinking of a body. *Two* bodies—the ranger's and Robin's.

"Wait a minute. The sneaker. Evidence," she said, scrambling under the table, where she had seen the so-called ranger kick Robin's small blue deck shoe.

The sneaker was gone. She should have known it wouldn't be left behind.

They searched the ground around the cabin, kicked at heaped layers of pine needles, looked for signs of loose earth. They looked in the woodshed and even moved some logs, to make sure there was no body beneath the neatly stacked cordwood.

The pump house was locked—with a padlock, so the credit card trick wouldn't work. They had no hacksaw, of course.

Kevin took his screwdriver out and opened the door by the simple expedient of unscrewing the plates through which the lock had been fastened. There was nobody inside.

"Wait a second," he said as Kim started back out the door. "If you have a generator and a pump, you have to have a well, unless you're pumping water from the lake. The lake freezes over in the winter, so it must be a well. Look for a trapdoor."

They found one under a tarpaulin. It, too, was padlocked. They removed the lock. It was pitch-dark down in the well.

"Got your flashlight?" Kevin asked.

"It's in the canoe," Kim said, wishing she'd had brains enough to bring it, but who had expected to need it to see down a well?

Kevin dropped the padlock into the well. It should have landed with a splash.

It didn't. It landed with a soft thud. There was more than water down there.

13

glimpse of horror

Kevin poked around in a clutter of odds and ends in a corner of the pump house and came up with a lantern. He lighted it and held it over the well.

"No good," he muttered. "No way to beam it down. We'll have to lower it. See if you can find some rope."

No such luck, so he took his belt and ran it through the handle of the lantern. Still no good; the water level was too far below. Kim contributed her own belt and buckled it to the end of Kevin's.

He lay flat on the floor, adding the length of his arm to that of the two belts. Suddenly he gagged.

Kim flung herself facedown to peer down, but Kevin motioned her back. "Don't look!" he said sharply.

"Is it. . . ." She couldn't get the name out.

"It's a man," he answered, swallowing hard. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Kim wanted to bolt out the door and keep on running, but first she had to ask, "Could there be another . . . anyone else?"

"One," he said shortly. "Come on."

He grabbed her hand and all but dragged her

outside. Once there, he leaned against the side of the pump house, gasping for air. His face was ghastly under his tan.

"What'll we do now?" Kim whispered.

"I guess there's only one thing we can do: get the canoe, paddle the length of the lake to the river, shoot the rapids, and get to the next ranger station as fast as we can."

"Rapids? What rapids?"

In the river, there was a long stretch of shallow water that was usually impassable, Kevin reminded her. Now there had been enough rainfall to turn it into white water, the kind sportsmen wait for so they can hold races.

"We'll have to try it," Kevin added. "It would take hours to walk the whole way to the other ranger station. It's daylight now, so maybe we can make it."

If only they'd had sense enough to tell Jan to report to a ranger! Kim could have kicked herself.

But, of course, Jan would have wits enough to do it on her own initiative; after all, she knew Robin was missing. But what good would it do? The Algonquin and Eagle Rock kids probably couldn't reach a station until it was too late.

Besides, Jan and Tom didn't even know about what had happened at this station—and the murder. They wouldn't alert the search teams to look for a criminal posing as a ranger.

"You're right," Kim said aloud. "It's up to us."

Let's get the canoe. If we don't hurry, it'll be dark before we even reach the rapids."

"Hold it," urged Kevin, catching her hand. "Don't run, or somebody might start taking pot-shots at us. Try to be quiet, too, okay?"

They crept around the station, down to the shore, and into the brush. It seemed as if some evil genius had booby-trapped their way with dry sticks. Every time Kim stepped on one, it sounded like a firecracker going off, sure to attract attention, even from a distance.

The canoe was gone.

"That's impossible. We left it right here," Kim whispered. "At least, I think it was here. Maybe not, though."

It was a forlorn hope, and in her heart she knew there was little point in looking any further. Kevin admitted as much, but they looked, anyway, around the next point and the next.

"We're only wasting time," Kevin said at last. "Let's quit kidding ourselves."

Losing the canoe seemed like the last straw. If Kim had been the crying type, she would have wept with frustration and fury, because, of course, they had not *lost* it at all. The murderer had disposed of it. If that were true, he had also expected them to come back here. If he knew they had discovered a body, he'd be forced to kill them, too.

With no knowledge of trails in the area, they

could take a week to work their way by land to the next ranger station. They couldn't stay here, either, because here they were sitting ducks.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Kevin whispered. "We'll just have to do the best we can and head toward the rapids on foot."

They skirted the station once more, and the place gave Kim the creeps. The windows stared blankly at her, but she knew that one of them could be sheltering the criminal. He could be right there, watching, his gun trained on them.

The unspoken agreement was to make their way along the edge of the lake, so they wouldn't get lost. In practice, it wasn't as easy as Kim and Kevin had hoped.

A thick clump of brambles caught at their clothes and scratched their hands. Branches snapped back in their faces; one of them whipped Kim across the eye and made tears run down her face.

"Some speed we're making," she whispered grimly. "About an inch an hour. Let's try walking in the shallow water."

She rolled up her jeans, took off her moccasins, and promptly gashed her foot on a sharp rock. That necessitated putting the moccasin back on, over a cut, without benefit of a bandage, but there was no time to worry about it at the moment.

The moccasins were as slippery as grease, once they were immersed in the water. She skidded,

waving her arms wildly and trying to regain her balance, but Kevin managed to catch her before she landed on her back.

The next time she slipped, she grabbed an overhanging branch. It slipped through her hands, caught Kevin, and nearly toppled him. He braced his feet and then stepped forward into a sudden depression. In he went, over his head.

For some distance, there was no place to climb back ashore. They were forced to swim, weighted down by water-soaked jeans.

They finally found a rock formation with enough cracks to provide precarious toeholds, dragged themselves up, and lay there, panting with exhaustion.

"I'm so tired, I could go to sleep right here," Kim mumbled, closing her eyes.

"I'm too hungry to sleep," said Kevin.

She wished he hadn't said that. Neither of them had had anything to eat since the day before. All they had between them now was the chocolate bar Kim had put in her pocket before they left the island. It was a gooey mess, good only for smearing her hands.

"Speaking of hands, I'd use my bare hands to break that guy's neck if I could find him," Kevin sighed. "He took not only our canoe but also the map that was in it. If we had the map, we'd be able to find a trail."

A trail would save them hours. On a trail, they

could cover miles with less energy than they were expending this way.

Having rested as long as they dared to, they went back to the water. At least it was shallow again, and they made reasonably good time for a while. Kim had reached such a point of fatigue that she all but forgot why they were here or what their objective was. She concentrated on moving one foot forward, then the other. That took willpower, because wet moccasins rubbing against wet feet had produced blisters—and blisters on top of the blisters.

"Will you look at that?" Kevin's voice was hushed with awe. "A dock!"

Kim's head snapped up. "Maybe there's a boat!" She scrambled ashore and ran.

There was no boat of any kind in evidence, but, looking around, she blinked her eyes in disbelief. Set back near the trees, blending in with them, was a log cabin with a wide porch.

Crazy! It wasn't the shape of a ranger station, so what was it doing here? The entire area had been declared forever wild. The forest service provided lean-tos, not cottages, for campers.

Kevin whistled softly between his teeth. "Maybe our luck has changed. I never dreamed of tripping over one of these private summer places. A few individuals made a deal with the government, way back when, and kept possession. Come on."

Kim's surge of elation lasted only until they

were at the door. The place was boarded up.

"Doesn't matter," Kevin said. "Look. Telephone wire. Must have cost a fortune to run the line in over a mountain. In we go." He fumbled at the back of his belt for his tool kit. He no longer had it!

"Oh, great," he groaned. "I didn't bother to thread my belt through the slots the last time I used it. Just pulled the flap over the belt and snapped it, and I've lost it somewhere."

The knowledge was chilling. It seemed to Kim that they had left a clear trail of belongings behind them. She had left her wet socks on a rock when they stopped to rest and had forgotten to put them back on. They had left footprints, broken branches, and now a tool kit.

Once the murderer knew which direction they had headed, he'd figure they would continue to follow the lake. He probably knew a quicker route through the woods and could overtake them easily—and soon!

"Here," she said, taking her hunting knife off her belt. "It's not much, but maybe you can pry a couple of nails out of a board and. . ."

Kevin snatched it. He nicked the blade and finally broke the point off, but he managed to loosen a board enough to get his fingers around it and pull it off by brute force.

"Hurry," urged Kim, glancing around. It seemed as if time had to be catching up with

them. Any second, there would be a shot. . . .

Kevin took the board and smashed the window. "Okay," he said. "Watch the broken glass." He climbed in gingerly, then gave her a hand.

"You look for the phone." Kim held back, the noise of the breaking glass echoing in her mind. Surely somebody could pinpoint the origin of the crash. "I'll stand and watch through the window."

Her prediction was too accurate for comfort. For a split second, she thought it was a trick of her imagination, but when she rubbed her eyes and stared again, she knew there was someone—something—off there in the trees, moving toward the clearing between the cabin and the lake. It was a man. Kim all but leaped away from the window, not daring to call out a warning to Kevin.

Kevin was on the far side of the dimly lit room, cranking the handle of a country phone, trying to raise an operator. "Phone's dead."

"He's out there." Kim's teeth were chattering; she grabbed his arm and pulled him through a door leading to the kitchen.

They should have made a dash for it through the broken window, she thought. Back here, their escape was cut off, because the door and window were heavily barred with boards.

Kim held her breath, as if that would help. She could hear a stealthy, scratching noise, as if someone were trying to ease himself through the window without gashing himself on the glass. She

braced herself, fully expecting to look into the barrel of a gun. Then she clapped her hand over her mouth, to keep from laughing hysterically.

A little chipmunk had appeared in the doorway, pausing to eye them inquisitively. He didn't seem in the least afraid.

"Are you sure you saw a man?" whispered Kevin. "Could it have been a deer?"

She was sure.

"Then, let's see if we can get out of here," he said. "Maybe he's not looking for us. Maybe he didn't hear the glass break. Ever think of that? If we can follow him. . . ."

Maybe he'd lead them to Robin. Yes, but he had a weapon, and they didn't have. Kevin was right, though, Kim reasoned; it would be better to try to follow the man than to try to reach the ranger station. They'd have to play it by ear if they discovered where he was holding Robin and figure out some way to catch that man off guard.

"Come on," she urged.

"One second." Kevin opened cupboard doors, found a tin of meat, and dropped it inside his shirt. He opened a drawer, took out a vicious-looking kitchen knife and a small cleaver, and slid them through his belt. "No can opener, but the cleaver should work to chop open the can. Okay, now. I'll go first," he said.

They crept back to the window and flattened themselves against the wall on either side of the

shattered pane, then waited for a full minute, straining their ears. They ventured a cautious look and pulled back again.

Nothing. The man was either out there, waiting patiently for them to emerge, or he had moved on quickly, unaware of their presence. His best bet would be to grab his hostage and get away from the area, perhaps cross over the border into Canada. It would be stupid for him to hang around here, and Kim didn't believe he was stupid.

"Okay," whispered Kevin. "Watch the glass. We'll try for the far side of the cabin, away from where you saw him."

An unpleasant thought flashed through Kim's mind. Anyone who would kidnap a child was deranged. It might give him a thrill to play cat and mouse with two additional victims. He might let them come out, allow them to feel almost safe, and then shoot them in the back as they rounded the corner of the cottage.

They dove into the brush to collect their wits. It was time to hold a fast planning session.

Hypothesis: There must be a trail nearby.

Fact: Owners of the cabin would require a means of packing in supplies.

Fact: Bringing vacation supplies in via the water route would be arduous, taking days.

Supposition: The trail might lead up and over the mountain, but it would come out near civilization of some sort.

Conclusion: The kidnapper would take his hostage out by way of the trail, probably to a waiting car.

Immediate objective: Find the trail and try to overtake the kidnapper.

"Let's go," whispered Kim and Kevin, in unison, and moved off.

The trail was right where it should have been, at the rear of the cabin, leading uphill. It seemed like a good omen, but since they had no desire to push their luck, they started their climb beside the trail, under cover of the trees.

The pine needles were too slippery under their wet moccasins to provide any traction. Kim had a fleeting recollection of once skiing on pine needles for kicks. It was almost as easy as skiing on snow. Right now, it seemed that every step forward meant two steps back. There was no other choice but to use the trail, hugging the sides so they could dive out of sight if they had to.

The trail was a sea of mud and loose rocks. What they needed was climbing boots, and that, Kim knew, was the wildest wishful thinking.

A stone slid out from under her foot, and down she went. When she stood up, pain shot from her ankle, up her leg, and through the top of her head.

Just what I always needed, she thought, gritting her teeth. *Okay, Cindy, I know you nurses say never to test for a fracture but to splint the injured part and get an X ray, to be on the safe side. But*

doggone it, I haven't got time to have a busted ankle.

She moved her foot and put her weight on it tentatively, wincing. It hurt like the dickens, but it would be easier to walk on it than on her hands.

Kevin produced a beat-up bandanna from his pocket, and she snatched it. She'd wrap her own sprained ankle, thank you.

Kim set her teeth and began doggedly climbing again. This time she watched her step.

The trail went up a steep rise, leveled off, and then dipped. They paused at the crest, looked down, and gasped.

A shadowy figure darted across the trail and into the trees—a small figure!

A larger figure followed, with a gun.

win a fur-lined soap dish." Mr. Van Alstyne, of Van Alstyne Shipping Lines. Translation: money, millions and jillions of shiploads of money, and that was a fact.

Kim Aldrich needed a few more facts before she could build a really good yarn. Despite her curiosity, she decided to bypass the drinking glass trick. If she held a glass against the wall and pressed her ear to the bottom of it, she'd be able to hear what was going on in Mr. Rydell's office. However, anyone getting off the elevator could see right through the glass door and catch her in the act.

The direct approach was easier, anyway, she decided. Secretaries tend to be invisible when they tap on the boss's door and slip in with the mail.

"Come in," said Mr. Rydell automatically. He didn't even look up as she entered the lavish office with its red carpet, its paneled walls, and its bookshelves lined with red leather.

Kim didn't make it to his desk. Mrs. Dixon pointed a finger at her.

"You're the one!" she said.

"What have I done now?" groaned Kim, her memory off and running again.

How many times had she short-sheeted the counselors' beds? Too many times to count. And what about putting sand in the beds as an extra bonus?—until she discovered that salt was better

because it didn't show and was harder to brush off the sheets.

She had a mental picture of herself sewing closed the bottoms of pajama legs as a surprise for every girl in her cabin . . . and of tucking a frog under someone's pillow.

There was also the little field mouse escapade. It wasn't enough to turn it loose at night and watch the counselors climbing, like panicky trapeze artists, up to the top bunks. For an encore, Kim took a candy box, punched holes in it so the mouse could breathe, gift wrapped it, and left it, anonymously, at Mrs. Dixon's place in the dining room.

The result was sensational. The package was opened, the mouse poked his head out, and Mrs. Dixon, completely unhinged, lost her legendary control. She shrieked and bolted out the door. The mouse followed at a more leisurely pace, savoring his moment of triumph.

No one had ever proved that Kim was the culprit, but now, facing Mrs. Dixon, she blushed as guiltily as if she had just been caught red-handed. Obviously, she was not the only one who remembered the incident.

"No, no, no," said her once embattled camp director, as if she had been reading Kim's mind. "I was not referring to the mouse. I mean, you're the one we need at camp—now."

"Don't you think I'm a little old for camp?" Kim

14

dead or alive?

Robin! screamed Kim soundlessly, her hand over her mouth.

Robin had somehow managed to escape!

It was nightmarish to look downhill at the kidnapper's back, knowing that Robin had crossed right ahead of him and wondering if he knew—knowing that if she and Kevin called out, they might increase her danger—knowing that the gun could be turned on them if they gave themselves away.

The entire thing was a nightmare. Finding a little girl was gone, setting out for help, discovering the body in the well, finding their canoe was gone, locating a phone that was disconnected, and now, seeing Robin under circumstances that paralyzed them.

If they didn't call out, Robin might keep running until she died of fright, and they might never find her again. She might even be killed in cold blood.

"If I had a weapon," muttered Kevin, "I swear I'd shoot him in the back. Find a rock, a stone. . . ."

There were no stones, now that they needed one. Kevin snatched the tin of meat from his shirt front, then stood up and pitched it, not at the kidnapper but in the direction opposite to the way in which Robin had run.

"There goes our lunch," he said under his breath.

The tin of meat crashed against something, and the kidnapper whirled. "Come out or I'll shoot," he snarled. He waited about three seconds and then, moving toward the sound, disappeared into the trees.

Kevin flung the meat cleaver as far as he could, ahead of the man, to lead him still farther away.

"Come on," he said, grabbing Kim's hand and heading diagonally downhill to try to find Robin.

Kim gasped involuntarily when they jumped down off a ledge. She had forgotten about her ankle until she landed on it.

If there were only some way to signal Robin, to let her know they were there, to make her wait for them! If she heard them or caught a glimpse of them, she'd think it was the kidnapper, and she'd run harder or hide. They might even go right past her!

But there *was* a way. Of course! The whippoorwill signal the Algonquin girls used—the one Running Deer taught them. Two notes, then flip your tongue against the roof of your mouth and sound a double note an octave higher.

Problem: How can you whistle when your mouth is so dry you can't even swallow? Kim worked her tongue around, trying to collect some saliva for the call that might save Robin's life.

It hit her then. The chances of doing the whistle exactly right were almost nil, under the circumstances. An obvious fake would alert the enemy, and the whistle wouldn't do much good, anyway; Robin hadn't yet learned to return the call.

Kim's ankle was killing her. She sat down and slid to the bottom of an incline. The respite wasn't enough to ease the pain; it was only enough to make it feel worse when she began running again.

Kevin stopped so suddenly that Kim plowed into him. He grabbed her arm and put a finger to his lips.

"Listen," he whispered.

She strained her ears, but all she could hear was the pounding of her own heart. It sounded like tom-toms resounding against her ribs and in her ears.

"There it is again," he said.

This time she heard it, too. It was off in the distance, but it made her hair stand on end.

She had heard that wild, inhuman cry once before, on a camping trip. It sounded like an insane woman—the way she imagined the maniac wife, Mr. Rochester's wife, would sound as the house burned down around her in *Jane Eyre*.

Later, Kim had seen the animal that had made that hideous noise. It was a bobcat. Someone had shot it, claimed the bounty, and had the creature stuffed and mounted. It was put on exhibition in a gas station near Algonquin. It scared the living daylights out of the campers who saw it. For a long time after it was removed, nobody wanted to go on camp-outs.

Kim shuddered and glanced at the trees above her. A wildcat could crouch on a branch, silently waiting. If someone invaded his territory, he would bare his teeth and claws and drop down on his enemy's back, screaming his hatred.

"Robin!" Kim gasped. A bobcat could tear the child to pieces! Somehow this was even more horrible than the prospect of her being shot. The suffering, the terror. . . . It would be too much for anyone to bear.

If they only had a weapon, she thought as they headed in the direction of the frightening cry.

Oh, shut up, she answered herself. *You've been wishing for a weapon right along. You haven't got one. Period.* The only thing she had was a hunting knife with a broken tip and a nicked blade, for all the good that would do.

Kevin still had the kitchen knife. It was clenched in his hand—until he tripped over a root and sprawled on his face, and the knife flew off, disappearing in the pine needles.

"Oh, swell," he muttered furiously, digging

around in the needles with his fingers.

There was no trace of the knife.

If anyone wants to hire us to write horror movies, we could give them a hair-raiser, thought Kim grimly. *That is, if we live to tell the tale*, she added, trying not to visualize a child with a torn and bleeding face. . . .

Stop that! she ordered, trying to throw a switch and turn off the mental picture. "Forget the knife. Come on," she urged Kevin.

The knife was lost for good, and they both had to admit it. As they ran on again, Kim had an idiotic thought: If the kidnapper followed them, maybe he'd fall on the knife and finish himself off! Under other circumstances, she would have giggled at herself for having such a far-out idea.

"Hold it." Kevin grabbed her to keep her from taking the one extra step that would have dropped her into a ravine.

The ground fell off abruptly, and they stared down, perhaps thirty-five feet. It was not an actual cliff, but the slope was steep enough that if a person weren't watching sharply, he could fall and slide all the way to the bottom.

"Look!" whispered Kim, pointing. Her throat was so tight that she could hardly get the word out.

There was someone down there—a small figure, about Robin-sized, lying still, one leg twisted at an odd angle. Maybe they hadn't heard a bobcat at

all. It could have been Robin, screaming when she fell.

Climbing down to her would take too long. Kim and Kevin sat down and slid on the seats of their pants.

If she's dead, I won't be able to bear it, thought Kim, picking herself up and scrambling over to grab the girl's wrist. She looked dead, all right. Her face was ashen under her tan, her eyes closed.

Kim felt as if her own heart would stop as she felt the wrist. She gave a sigh of relief when there was a pulsebeat, then realized she had made the amateur's mistake of using her thumb on the wrist. She was feeling her own pulse.

She tried again and this time caught the beat with her fingertips. The pulse was faint, but at least Robin was alive—so far. She could still die of shock or internal injuries.

Kevin was at Robin's feet, kneeling to get a closer look. One foot was caught in the ugly steel jaws of a bear trap.

Kim stared at the mangled foot, sick with horror. Even if Robin survived her ordeal, it would be a miracle if amputation could be avoided.

There was no doubt now about the scream they had heard, and Kim could only hope that the kidnapper, led in the opposite direction by Kevin's trick, had been too far away to hear it. Shuddering, she thought of the agony of having that . . .

that *thing* snap shut. No wonder Robin had passed out; it was a good thing she had.

"We have to open that trap," said Kevin.

"But how?"

"Give me that hunting knife of yours," he ordered tensely.

There was a catch that was supposed to release the trap, so the animal could be removed. Kim thought of all the beautiful wild creatures who had met death in such a hideous manner.

The catch was rusted; it refused to budge. Kevin tried sliding the knife blade between the jaws and succeeded in breaking off some more of the blade.

"Hold her steady, if you can. I'm going to have to smack that catch with a rock." He looked ill but determined.

Kim held, Kevin smacked, and the trap popped open so suddenly that he almost fell across Robin's injured foot. He caught himself, then kicked the trap away.

Now was the time they needed a blanket, to wrap Robin up and try to forestall the deep shock that could kill her. Now was the time they needed sterile dressings, a splint, antibiotics. . . . Oh, sure, Kim thought. What they really needed was a doctor and an ambulance. Sorry, fresh out of doctors and ambulances.

Robin groaned and tossed her head. Her eyes opened wide, pupils dilated and unseeing.

"It's all right," Kim whispered, wishing that she could believe it, knowing that she was lying. There was nothing all right about it, except the bare fact that Robin was alive.

I shouldn't even be here, Kim thought. *It should be Cindy. She's a nurse. She'd know what to do.*

Sure, but even nurses need bandages and splints and things. And if she, Kim, had them, she'd put her first aid training to use and do *something*.

Improvise. The word popped into her head just as clearly as if Cindy Aldrich, R.N., were right there looking over her kid sister's shoulder.

Kevin was already peeling off his beat-up jacket and shirt. He skinned off his T-shirt and handed it over, with an apologetic shake of his head. It was anything but sterile; it wasn't even clean or dry, but it was soft, at least.

Kim used it as padding around the wounds. She used strips torn from the sleeves of the shirt to bind it in place.

They rigged a makeshift splint. Two nice, neat, slender poles would have been appropriate, but no such equipment was available. They settled for two pine boughs, and Kevin had to climb back up the embankment to get them. He brought back an armload, and Kim selected two with sturdy branches.

They made a bed out of the rest, lifted Robin

onto it, and covered her with their jackets. *Dandy*, thought Kim bitterly. *Now we'll just pick up the phone and call for the ambulance.*

She looked bleakly at Kevin. "What do we do now? We don't have a stretcher, and we don't know our way out of here."

Even if they found their way back to the trail, they had no idea where the trail led—not to mention the fact that they'd run the risk of bumping smack into the kidnapper and the fact that they certainly couldn't leave Robin here alone while they went for help.

"I'm going back to the lake and look for that canoe," said Kevin. "It's the only way out."

"We did look. It's gone."

"It couldn't just vanish into thin air," Kevin argued. "Look, if you were the kidnapper, what would *you* do with the canoe?"

"Sink it. Of course!" Her brief feeling of elation faded. "Yes, but I'd knock holes in it first. In his case, he'd probably shoot it full of holes."

"Sure, *you* would, but he didn't. If he had, we'd have heard gunshots or metallic sounds. Remember what a racket it made when we put the patch on it? There haven't been sounds."

Conclusion: no holes in the canoe. Simple logic, and they should have thought it through hours ago, when they first discovered the canoe was gone from the hiding place.

Maybe it was just as well they hadn't thought,

Kim realized, shuddering. If they had found it and gone to the next ranger station, no search and rescue mission could have been organized and ready to go until after a night had passed. Meanwhile, Robin could have died of shock, long before they found her, or the kidnapper, with no one to furnish him with a false scent, might have caught up with her.

"I'm going back to look," Kevin announced. "We would have seen it if it had been sunk between the point where we left it and the cabin with the dead phone. I'll look in the opposite direction."

That left Kim alone with an injured, unconscious child who could die any minute. Robin was deathly pale; her skin was cold and clammy.

Rapid, thready pulse, cold and clammy skin, pallor—the symptoms of shock, Kim remembered, now that she had time to think, nothing *but* time, until Kevin came back.

She remembered something else. How many times had Cindy told her? "Put the patient in shock position, with the head lower than the feet."

Kim used to get it mixed up. She found it hard to remember whether the head should be raised or lowered for heat exhaustion or sunstroke. Head raised for possible head injury; that was easy. But she could never be sure about the other first aid cases, until Cindy told her a jingle: "If the face is red, raise the head. If the face is pale, raise the tail." She remembered that.

Okay, then, Kim was going to have to move Robin to the slope and position her with her head lower than her feet. Which was better: leave her alone and avoid moving the foot, or move the child and prevent possible death? Stupid question.

It meant two moves, one to get Robin off her improvised bed and another to get her back on the newly positioned bed. Fortunately she was light enough for Kim to lift, but the added weight reminded her of her own injured ankle.

Compared to Robin's injury, it was nothing. Kim set her teeth against the pain.

"I hurt," whimpered Robin. Her eyes flew open and darted around wildly, until she focused on Kim. "I thought you'd never come. I thought I was going to die."

"Sh," whispered Kim, blinking back her own tears. "I'm here now. I know you're hurt, but we'll take care of you."

"What about that man?" Robin's voice rose, quavering. "Where is he? He . . . he . . . he's been following me ever since I came to camp. I was scared. Don't tell anyone I was scared. . . ."

"Don't be ashamed of being scared," Kim said. "It takes brains to be afraid, but why didn't you tell someone?"

Robin spoke slowly, her voice weak and her breathing labored. "What good would that do? Nobody would have believed me. They would have said I was making it up. Everybody hates me, and

nobody would have tried to help me, so I tried to run away."

The story came out in bits and pieces. Robin knew about the previous kidnapping threat. She was sure her parents didn't care, because they kept sending her places, anyway.

She thought the man on horseback was trying to get her. She had recognized him during a portage on the canoe trip. He was the lone man they had met—the one carrying his canoe. Robin had kept her face averted and had kept her fears to herself, because the man was going in the opposite direction.

"But he was looking for us," Robin said, her voice breaking. "He turned around and followed us. I tried to get away in the dark and go to the ranger station. I . . . made it, too, but he caught up with me. He . . . he shot . . . and . . . and I bit him and got away. I lost my sneaker." She sobbed, as if somehow the lost sneaker was the greatest tragedy of all.

"I hurt." Her voice fell to a whisper. "Kim, do you think I'm dying?"

15

save the murderer!

You're not going to die if I can help it, Kim vowed silently.

Robin had slipped back into unconsciousness, and that was a blessing. At least for the moment, she felt no pain. Kim had let her talk, get it all off her chest, afraid to hush her up, because that would let her realize that she was still in danger. A little extra fear could tip the balance the wrong way.

Now Kim had to make up for the sounds that might have been heard. She climbed up the bank, ignoring the pain in her own ankle, and gathered some more pine boughs. She took them back and used them for camouflage, lying close to Robin to provide a little body warmth. The boughs covered both of them.

It wasn't a very good camouflage, but it seemed better than nothing, in case the kidnapper happened to look down the ravine. The trouble was, she couldn't see out, and she almost jumped out of her wits when someone began pulling off the cover.

"Good thinking," said Kevin.

Kim's heart did a dive. Good thinking, her foot! She hadn't thought a single thing through. For instance, suppose Kevin had had the inordinate good luck to find the canoe—what were they going to use for paddles?

Fortunately Kevin *had* thought of that. He had found the canoe, just as they had hoped, along the shore where he had thought it might be. It was partially submerged beneath the surface, in shallow water, hidden in thick brush along the shoreline. "I remembered seeing a couple of paddles in that pump house. Brought 'em with me. I was hoping I might find a stretcher. No such luck, but I got a blanket and a rope."

They laced the rope between the paddles to form a makeshift litter, wrapped Robin in the blanket, and lifted her onto the litter. Kevin took the front end, because he was taller and it would make the going easier downhill.

"How's *your* ankle? Think it'll hold up?" he asked.

"It'll hold up because it has to. Come on, let's get out of here." Kim picked up her end of the burden.

They carried Robin headfirst down the hill, to keep her in shock position. It was rough going, working their way under trees, around boulders, through mud, and over slippery pine needles. There was no way to avoid making noise, and Kim expected the kidnapper to catch up with them at

any second. If he did, they'd be helpless.

Her nerves were ready to snap by the time they reached the spot where the canoe was hidden. Now they had to set the litter down, wade out into the water, drag the canoe in and dump it, put Robin in, dismantle the litter, climb in, and shove off.

"Where're we going?" Robin mumbled, aware once again of activity around her.

"Don't you worry about a thing," said Kevin. "We're going to the next ranger station and then on to the hospital, to get you fixed up. Can you hang on for just a little while longer?"

"I'm okay," she said through clenched teeth.

Kim wished she could say the same. They had a long way to go, and they didn't have time to hug the shoreline, where it would be easier to keep hidden. They were completely exposed on open water. Ahead of them lay the danger of shooting the rapids, if the river was high enough. Otherwise, they'd have another few miles of hiking.

"Faster," Kevin ordered. "Give it all you've got."

That was crazy. They had to save enough strength to paddle for miles. Kim glanced back to remind Kevin, and her heart flipped.

Someone was following them, paddling with long, powerful strokes. He was all too familiar. Of course! He had his own canoe; all the time he'd had a canoe hidden somewhere.

Kim swung back and got to work. It was two

paddles against one, but with three people, their load was greater.

"What's wrong?" asked Robin, her weak voice sharper with alarm.

"Keep your head down," snapped Kevin. Then, in a lighter tone, he added, "Nothing's wrong, Princess. We just decided it's time to finish up the joyride and get you to the hospital."

"I'm not a baby." Even now, Robin could summon up a half-defiant tone. "I know what's wrong. It's that man. He's following us, isn't he?"

"Keep *down*!" Kevin ordered.

Kim expected to catch, any moment, a slug between the shoulders. She didn't look back but just paddled until her muscles screamed for mercy. Her mouth and throat were so dry that she couldn't swallow.

"Harder!" said Kevin.

It was impossible to paddle harder, but Kim did the impossible; she was so scared that adrenalin pumped through her body, giving her a burst of energy that she wouldn't have dreamed she could produce.

"Harder!"

She wanted to drop the paddle, collapse, and get it over with. Instead, she paddled harder.

At last they reached the outlet from the lake into the river—the river, where only the rapids lay between them and help and safety. Suddenly, around a bend, the calm waters disappeared.

They were now in the rapids!

The river was wild, boiling white over the rocks. It snatched the frail canoe, swung it broadside, twirled it in an eddy, tossed it into the air.

It was a battle for survival, and Kim's arms felt as if they were being ripped off at the shoulders. She dug her blade in sideways and pulled against it, trying to keep the bow from splitting wide open against a jagged rock.

When they swung sideways again, she risked a quick look behind. This was what they meant by "between the devil and the deep blue sea"! The route ahead seemed like sure disaster, and behind them, gaining on them, was a murderer.

The man was on his knees, aiming his rifle.

"Duck," yelled Kim.

The shot went wild. Someone shouted in fury, and someone screamed in terror. For a second, Kim thought Robin had taken the bullet, right through the side of the canoe.

It wasn't Robin, though; it was the killer. He had shipped his paddle for an instant, to shoot, and the river had grabbed his canoe. The man was flung out. The canoe landed upside down.

He was sucked under, turned over and over, and propelled forward at tremendous speed. He was going to drown or be battered to death. It served him right, but it was horrible nevertheless.

Robin was crying helplessly. "He'll be killed."

"Nothing we can do about it," rasped Kevin.

"Takes two paddlers to keep us afloat."

Robin's voice shook. She was dangerously close to hysteria. "I . . . can steer. Get . . . him."

"Get down!" roared Kevin, and Robin's head dropped back weakly. "Kim, get on your knees and steer. More stable that way. I'll see if we can catch him broadside when he goes by."

It was one chance in a million but better than having Kevin go overboard and try to swim. The man was tossed upward, then dunked again. He came up, hands outstretched, face contorted with terror, silently pleading.

Kevin reached out with his paddle. The man grabbed for it, missed, and was swept past. Kim held out her paddle. He managed to catch it and almost pulled her over the side of the canoe.

Like a madman, he came, hand over hand, toward the canoe, grabbed the gunwale, and tried to pull himself in. The canoe rocked wildly.

"No!" yelled Kevin. "Just hold on, and I'll try to get us to shore."

He might as well have been talking to a stone wall. The kidnapper was beyond rationality.

"Take my paddle and clobber him," shouted Kevin.

"No, keep it and steer," Kim shouted back.

There was only one thing to do, so she did it. She gave the kidnapper a karate chop on the side of the neck, grabbed his wrist, crouched low in the canoe, and tried to hang on.

It was an irrational reaction on her part. She should have let him go. His life wasn't worth Robin's, Kevin's, or her own, but she couldn't make herself loosen her fingers. They seemed to have a will of their own, clutching ever tighter and tighter.

They swept around a turn in the river. Kim watched the point of land around which they careened and, in a moment of wild humor that was more hysteria, dubbed it "Boiling Point."

The river was wider now, lessening their chances of getting to shore. Whatever chance they had was up to Kevin. Kim's paddle was long gone, thanks to the kidnapper.

"Hey!" she yelled. "Looks like some kind of a landing up ahead. It is a landing. There's a man on it!"

It was a ranger, watching them with binoculars. He put them down and picked up a coil of rope.

"Bring 'er in as close as you can," he shouted as they neared him. "Catch the rope. And hold out a paddle. I'll see if I can grab it."

A rope whipped past Kim's head.

"Got it!" screamed Robin, reaching out and grasping it.

Kevin flung himself forward and got his hands on the rope, just in time to save Robin from being pulled out of the canoe.

Through some sort of superhuman effort, the ranger drew them in to the landing. He pulled the

kidnapper up and laid him facedown, checking to make sure he was breathing. Then he came back to secure the canoe with ropes.

"Watch it, now," Kevin said. "We have an injured kid. I'll hand her up to you. Take her on inside your cabin, will you?"

The ranger blew up. "You crazy fools, you could have all been killed! Don't you know enough not to go white-water canoeing without helmets and life jackets? And *four* in one canoe! You should have your heads examined."

It was Kevin's turn to erupt. "Will you take this child and get her inside?" he bellowed. "Call an ambulance."

"Oh, stop yelling, both of you," said Kim wearily. "You're wasting time."

There was something she had to do while the ranger carried Robin inside, only she was so exhausted she couldn't remember what it was. Oh, yes—tie up the murderer. He wasn't moving, but that might be a trick.

"Rope," she muttered.

"Right," said Kevin, taking over the job. He trussed the kidnapper securely.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" demanded the ranger, facing them from the cabin door. He had a pistol, and it was pointed at Kevin.

"Put that silly thing away," snapped Kevin, "and give me a hand with this guy. We'd better take him inside and try to keep him alive, now

that we've come this far—not that he deserves it.”

The ranger hesitated, holstered the weapon, and helped. Kim trailed along, her feet leaden.

Robin was lying on a cot. The kidnapper was put down on a blanket on the floor.

“Call an ambulance, and get the state police,” said Kim.

“Already did,” said the ranger. “All right, both of you, back against the wall, and let's not have any funny stuff.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Kevin demanded.

“It means I'm holding you until the troopers get here. Attempted kidnapping, suspicion of murder.”

“*What?*” yelled Kim.

“You heard me,” the ranger said coldly. “The little girl said you tried to kidnap her and that you'd killed—”

“You're out of your mind.” Kim tried to piece it together, but it just didn't make sense. Sure, Robin had acted like a little stinker, but she'd had reasons. She wasn't an evil child, and most certainly she wouldn't try to create an unpleasant situation for the people who had rescued her. “Robin, tell him—”

“Save your breath,” said the ranger. “The kid's unconscious. She just had time to tell me before she passed out cold again.”

A ghastly thought struck Kim. The ranger's mind was made up. Suppose, just suppose, that Robin never regained consciousness. How were they going to refute the charge? She and Kevin had no witnesses for their defense.

This crazy misunderstanding seemed like the last straw. Of course, it might not be a misunderstanding at all. Maybe this ranger was an impostor, too. How did they even know he'd called for an ambulance?

"You're out of your skull," said Kevin. "This guy killed a ranger—"

"Not likely. He's a ranger, too. Look at his uniform—"

"If you'd just kindly let me finish," said Kevin, through clenched teeth. "He was trying to kidnap the girl. She ran to the ranger station. This guy killed the ranger and dumped his body in a well. The kid escaped again, but she got hurt—caught her foot in a bear trap. We found her."

"Sounds pretty farfetched," said the ranger, the gun again in his hand.

"We were looking for her. She's a camper from Algonquin," Kim broke in. "That man followed us. He tried to shoot us, but he fell out of his canoe. We saved him."

"Now, why would you go trying to save a man who was shooting at you? My theory is that you were trying to get away with the little girl, and he grabbed hold of the canoe—"

"Hah!" snorted Kim. "He's unconscious, isn't he? He might have a fractured skull, for all I know. Just tell me—I dare you—how he could hang on to a canoe. I was holding him. And I . . . I wish I hadn't."

"I don't much care what you think, right this minute," Kevin broke in. "You've got a phone. I want to use it, and don't try to stop me. The law says I'm allowed one call."

The ranger didn't try to stop him when he put in a long-distance call, collect, to the Van Alstyne's home in New York. He gave a brief account of Robin's misadventures.

"What's the nearest hospital?" he asked the ranger. "Where will they take the little girl?"

"Glens Falls."

"Glens Falls," Kevin repeated, into the phone. "Right. Good-bye."

Kim was allowed a call, too. She made hers to Mrs. Dixon. "Someone tried to kidnap Robin," she said. "No, we found her. . . . She's alive, but she's hurt. . . . Glens Falls Hospital. . . ."

"What?" For once, Mrs. Dixon lost control. Her voice rose in a shriek that was audible to Kevin and the ranger.

"It's all right. At least, it will be, if we get her to the hospital soon." *Except for Robin's running the risk of an amputation*, Kim added to herself. There was no point in going into details right now. "She'll need a surgeon. I . . . guess you'd better

notify—" No, Kevin had already called the Van Alstyne home. "I'll see you there."

This second ranger must be for real. He had let them make two phone calls. While she was talking to the director of Camp Algonquin, Kevin had cooled down enough to tell the story from start to finish. The ranger wrote notes.

"I'm inclined to buy it," he said. "You have to understand that I still have to give a report to the state police, and they may want to hold you, but I rather doubt it.

"The little girl said, 'He tried to kidnap me.' Well, the other man was dressed in a ranger's uniform, so I assumed she meant you."

"But you really did call for an ambulance?" asked Kim.

"Yes, ma'am, I sure did." He glanced at his watch. "Should be here any minute. I called the emergency squad at North Creek; that's the closest. It'll take another hour to get to the hospital, though."

He poked up the fire in the potbellied stove and put on coffee. Kim was beginning to shake with fatigue and cold from her wet clothing. She moved up close to the stove.

"I'm thirsty," Robin whimpered.

Kim flew over to the cot. "It's okay now, Robin," she said. "We're safe. This is a real ranger, and he's taking care of everything. The ambulance—"

"I want a drink of water. Please."

“I know you do, but I can’t give it to you just yet.” It was hard to refuse, but Robin would have to have anesthesia, and Kim knew, from her nurse sister, that the patient should have nothing by mouth beforehand.

A siren sounded in the distance.

It was the loveliest sound Kim Aldrich had ever heard. She only hoped it wasn’t too late.

16 if her mind lasts

The ride to the hospital had a dreamlike quality. Oh, the sheer luxury of having a doctor in the ambulance, with his fingers on Robin's pulse! The state trooper guarding the man strapped on the second stretcher was a great comfort, too.

The experts were in charge, and Kim could relax at long last. She and Kevin rode in the front seat. It seemed as if they floated on clouds of relief. Both of them fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion.

They slept until the ambulance pulled up at the hospital's emergency entrance. Nurses and interns whisked Robin away. Kim remembered that somebody would have to sign the permission for surgery, then realized that Mrs. Dixon would be there by then and that, one way or another, she'd handle it.

The kidnapper, still wearing the remnants of a ranger's uniform, was wheeled off to the X-ray department, under armed guard. Kim and Kevin were taken to the accident room, each in a wheelchair, at the insistence of a nurse. They were too groggy to give her an argument.

Kevin was treated for various cuts and released, but he was told to wait around until an officer could take his statement. Kim's ankle injury was diagnosed as a sprain, shot full of Novocain to deaden the pain, and strapped. The gash on the bottom of her foot was cleansed and bandaged.

"The best thing for it is to walk on that ankle," the doctor said. "It'll hurt, but it'll heal faster if you don't favor it."

"Walk." Kim began to laugh, almost hysterically. "How about walking twenty miles or so?"

"I wouldn't overdo it," he said.

That struck her as even funnier. "You mean I'm supposed to *unwalk* that twenty-mile hike?"

The poor man had no sense of humor. He looked at her a little warily, then picked up an instrument and looked at the pupils of her eyes, checking for brain damage.

"Get some rest," he suggested. "You look as if you need it."

"What's rest?" Kim began to giggle again, but the joke fell apart, along with her near-hysterical amusement. "Is there any news of Robin?" she asked. "The little girl with the injured foot?" Maybe the foot was being amputated right now, while Kim Aldrich was sitting there laughing like an idiot.

"Sorry," the doctor apologized. "I didn't realize you people were the ones who brought the accident case in."

Robin was in the operating room, he told them. They could wait for news upstairs in the solarium.

They rode up in an elevator and joined the group of other anxious people. The Van Alstyne's housekeeper was there, with Mrs. Dixon, Mr. Van Alstyne, and a woman who must be Robin's mother, from the anguished look on her face.

It was a relief to know that the parents were there, but, for the life of her, Kim couldn't figure out how they'd gotten there so fast. The last she knew, they had been in Europe.

Facing them was one of the hardest things she had ever had to do. "I can't tell you how . . . how terrible I feel about this," she stammered. "I . . . I . . ."

"You saved her life, I understand," Mr. Van Alstyne answered. "You and Mr. Clark."

"Mr. Clark? Oh, Kevin. Yes, he's the one who really saved her; I couldn't possibly have done it alone. But I'm the one who shouldn't have let it happen in the first place. I still don't know what really happened. I don't see how one man, working alone, could have—"

A state police officer cleared his throat to get their attention. He took out a notebook and asked them to relate their version of the entire episode.

Kim began at the beginning, with the man on horseback, and told the officer that Robin said it was the same man they met later, on the portage.

"That's hearsay, of course," he reminded her,

"unless you yourself recognized him."

Kim had to admit that she had not recognized the man. It sounded, to her own ears, like an admission of negligence, from the very start. She felt like digging a hole in the floor, climbing in, and pulling the hole in after her.

"Stick to facts," suggested the officer, "just the facts that you know, of your own knowledge."

That meant living the entire nightmare again in retrospect: discovering that Robin was gone, going to the ranger's station, discovering an impostor, seeing Robin's sneaker . . . discovering the loss of the canoe, finding Robin with her foot in the trap, the race down the lake, shooting the rapids. . . .

A nurse interrupted the recital. She came in to tell the Van Alstynes that Robin would be all right and that the foot would be saved. They could see her in a little while, although she would still be very groggy.

Mrs. Van Alstyne burst into tears, then collected herself and came over to Kim. "I can never thank you enough," she said. "Never. There are no words—"

"No, please. I still feel guilty." Kim's head came up. "You *can* thank me, come to think of it. She ran away because she was scared, and she said you always send her away to boarding school and camp just to get rid of her."

Mrs. Van Alstyne gasped. "That's not true. We

send her because we love her. She's an only child, and she needs the companionship of other children . . . some of that kind of fun."

"She needs *you*," Kim said bluntly. "She needs to know *you* love her, before she can feel lovable enough to make friends. Your housekeeper said—"

"Mrs. Clark," said Mrs. Van Alstyne.

"Mrs. Clark? Is that her name? Well, Mrs. Clark said—"

The housekeeper's face went white. "Now I can see that it's my fault, and I'll never forgive myself. Yes, I told her that if anything happened to her, you'd never get over it. I put the idea in her head to run away, to test your reaction. . . ."

"No, that's wrong," Kim put in. "She ran away because she was afraid. She tried, poor kid, to get to the ranger station—exactly as you told her and all the other girls to do in an emergency, Mrs. Dixon."

Mr. Van Alstyne rubbed his chin. His eyes were cold. "I begin to put two and two together. There was a kidnapper, yes, but there had to be someone else to call the signals, someone who knew where Robin would be at all times." His eyes swept the room.

"You're right," Mrs. Dixon said. "Of course! Your Mrs. Clark knew. Robin wrote to her constantly and kept her informed."

They didn't actually know what Robin wrote to Mrs. Clark, Kim pointed out. Robin sealed her

letters; none of the counselors knew what she wrote.

"Then *he* told her." Mrs. Dixon pointed at Kevin. "He always knew. You, Kim, always told him, and he relayed the information to his mother, who passed it along to her hired kidnapper. Kevin showed up to make sure everything was going according to plan."

"His *mother*?" Kim was astounded.

"Mrs. Clark. Mother of Kevin Clark," snapped Mrs. Dixon. "Don't you see? It all fits. She resented all those things being lavished on other children, when her own son was having to struggle so, even for an education."

"That doesn't make sense," Kim said. "Kevin rescued Robin. He could have been killed in the process."

"Of course. The kidnapper wasn't supposed to commit murder. He just had to hold Robin for a few days, collect a million dollars in ransom, and then turn her loose."

Kevin put his arm around his mother's shoulders. "Do you believe that?" he asked Kim.

"Of course not." Kevin was . . . Kevin—strong, good, dependable.

"In case anybody is interested, I have a job that more than covers my tuition," Kevin said. "But I agree; somebody was calling the signals."

"What I don't understand is how you got here so fast, Mr. Van Alstyne." It couldn't be coinci-

dence. Kim didn't believe in coincidence.

"Mrs. Clark called us yesterday," he said. "She had just received a letter from Robin, saying she thought someone was following her. Then, about three or four hours ago, we got the ransom demand. We got the money, in unmarked bills, and came in our private plane." He glanced significantly at a suitcase.

Kim stared at it in fascination. There was more money in that case than she had ever seen in her life.

There was still something wrong about the sequence of events. "How could you get the ransom demand?" she asked. "The kidnapper didn't actually *have* Robin. Besides, he never had a chance to get near a phone."

Three or four hours ago? That was just about when the real ranger was phoning for the ambulance and the police, Kevin was phoning the Van Alstyne home—and Kim was calling Mrs. Dixon to tell her what had happened.

"Who told you about the ransom demand?" Kim asked Mr. Van Alstyne.

"Mrs. Dixon phoned," he answered, stepping in front of the door, as if to bar it.

Suddenly Mrs. Dixon took a half step toward the suitcase, then turned and tried to force her way past Robin's father. Failing, she spun around to face Kim. "It's all your fault!" she shouted. "You weren't supposed to find her. Everything

would have been all right. Robin would have been found safe, but you ruined it all. You made me hurry. I had to move fast to get the money before they knew you'd found her."

"Didn't you realize I'd call my mother?" Kevin asked. His tone was almost gentle.

No, Mrs. Dixon hadn't thought of that. She had panicked. The money had been practically in her hands, and she had to hurry. She hadn't stopped to think it through.

"But why?" whispered Kim.

"Why?" she sobbed. "You ask why! I've taught school in New York for thirty-five years. It's awful. Not the way it used to be. Children don't learn—don't want to learn. Parents give teachers orders instead of the other way around . . . no respect. I was attacked by two hoodlums last semester . . . knives . . . I'll never go back, never. . . ."

"You're right about that," said the officer. "You're not going back to teaching school. Now, come along."

"It isn't fair," she wept. "It's his fault. He never did anything right in his life! Promised me everything, and, instead, he went to jail and left me to— Said he'd make it up to me. All we had to do was borrow Robin for a few hours. He wasn't supposed to kill anyone. . . ."

What in the world was she babbling about? Kim wondered.

"I never should have married him."

Kim's jaw dropped. Good heavens! The missing Mr. Dixon. No wonder she had never mentioned him, if he had been in jail. He must have just been released.

Mrs. Dixon made one more compulsive move toward the suitcase.

"There's nothing in it but clothes," said Mr. Van Alstyne, motioning to the officer to get her out of there. "We knew, just *before* your call, Mrs. Dixon, that Robin had been found. Kevin called, remember?"

"That's not fair!" Now the woman was screaming, uncontrolled. "You should have told me!"

"I'll see you in court," said Mr. Van Alstyne. He added, in an aside to Kim, "If her mind lasts that long, which I doubt."

Mr. Van Alstyne took his wife by the arm when a nurse signaled from the doorway, and led her off to see their daughter. Kim collapsed into a chair.

"You know, we met three men on a canoe trip," she said. "I thought they—"

"Those were friends of mine." Kevin grinned. "Classmates. They were going on a canoe trip, anyway, so I got them to start at one end of the chain of lakes and I started at the other end; then somebody would be around if there was any trouble. The only reason I took this job at camp was to be nearby. Mother always worries about Robin."

Kim could only thank her lucky stars that he

had hung around. The fact that he was also attractive and great fun to be with was a big, wonderful bonus, she told herself, feeling as if she just might be purring a little—silently.

"Come on," Kevin said, holding out his hand. "Let's go see if we can visit Robin. Want to come, Mother?"

"Later," said Mrs. Clark. "They only allow two visitors at a time. You two have earned the next visit."

They waited outside Robin's door until her parents came out, then entered. Robin, sleepy-eyed from pain-killers and sedatives, grinned feebly at them. Abruptly she began to cry.

"I'm sorry for everything," she sobbed. "Would you believe I—" Robin was not finding the words easy to say—"I never said I was sorry for anything . . . in my whole life? I . . . I didn't want to be so awful. I guess I don't blame everyone for hating me." She turned her head away, as if to hide the tears.

"Oh, hey, now," said Kevin, "nobody hates you, Princess. You're a brave girl. You're kind and good, too. You're even the one who wanted to save that man's life."

"Well, I didn't want *anybody* to die."

"There, you see?" said Kim. "Only a really fine person would have cared what happened to a murderer—especially after what he did to you. Robin, people will like you—love you—if you'll just stop

acting so thorny and tell them that *you* love *them*."

"I don't even know how to tell them," said Robin, her voice almost a whisper.

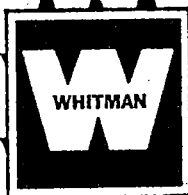
"There're lots of ways to tell them, but I'll show you one of the nicest ways: I love you, Robin. We both love you," said Kim. She bent down and kissed the little girl's cheek.

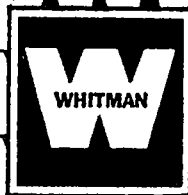
Robin's tears came again, but this time she was smiling. "I know—I'm silly," she said. "It's my age. I'll outgrow it. That's what Muffin always says. And my foot's going to get better fast, because"—drowsy as her eyes were, they lit up—"my parents are anxious to have me at home."

Kim had a lump in her throat, thinking of all those agonizing hours when she would have settled gladly for the old Poison Ivy, just knowing that she'd live to grow up. Now Robin was out of the woods—in more ways than one.

"Come on," whispered Kevin. "She's asleep again. Let's go somewhere and plan how to celebrate our deeds of daring!"

Hand in hand, they tiptoed out of Robin's room.







KIM ALDRICH is in deadly danger when, posing as a summer camp counselor, she must try to protect a wealthy young girl from a kidnapper. It's an adventure that even Kim will never forget, when she and Kevin, an attentive boys' camp counselor, stalk a vicious kidnapper-killer through the mountain wilderness as they search for the missing girl, in

THE LONG SHOT